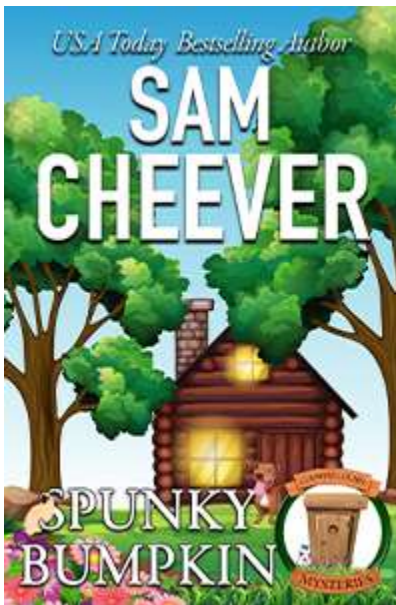




Summer Snoops UNLEASHED FIRST CHAPTERS

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Sam Cheever

Spunky Bumpkin

In a small country town, justice might be swift...but rumor is swifter!

An elderly woman with a bloody knife in her hand and no recollection of how it got there. A dead troublemaker. A distraught Deputy. And a new secret for Joey to unravel. Deer Hollow might be quaint...its people quirky...but murder has a way of messing up even the best of the best laid plans...and putting paid to a girl's hopes of sharing a sunny Saturday with her sweet pibl and handsome boyfriend.

CHAPTER ONE

I was a soggy, sobbing mess. I'd known I shouldn't let Hal talk me into watching a movie about a boy and his dog. That never ended well for the dog.

Hollyweird just loved making pet lovers miserable.

On the screen, the eighteen-year-old gave his sad-eyed dog, which had been at his side since he was a small boy, a negligent wave and walked out the door, heading off to college and new excitement...without his faithful canine companion.

The dog sank dejectedly to the boy's bed, nose on paws and liquid brown eyes sad enough to make a serial killer sob, and I broke down into loud, inconsolable sobbing of my own.

Hal looked alarmed. He tried to move closer to wrap an arm around my shoulders, but Caphy was having none of it. If there was consoling to do, she'd be the dog to do it.

After all, it had been the human male who'd gotten me into the mess, it would take a pibl to ease me out of it.

She'd jumped up onto the couch between us at the start of the movie, draping her heavy form across my lap as if she'd known we needed to store up a good dose of canine comfort, and she wasn't letting anybody near me as I completely fell apart.

She'd even given LaLee a low growl, the hair on her back rising to reinforce the warning.

I wrapped my arms around her and buried my face in her sweet-smelling fur, sobbing uncontrollably.

Hal's big, warm hand found my shoulder and patted ineffectually. He clicked off the movie, and the room fell silent except for my sniffing and the occasional hiccupping sob.

I could feel Hal's regret like a vibration on the air.

I finally stopped crying and lifted my head, running the heel of my hand across my cheeks to sop up some of the copious moisture there.

Hal wordlessly handed me his pristine handkerchief.

"Thank you," I said in a tear-clogged voice. "Sorry."

He shook his head, squeezing the small part of my body Caphy was allowing him to touch. "It's my fault. You tried to warn me."

I gave a watery laugh. "I did."

A deep rumble sounded behind me, and I turned my head to see LaLee had moved closer. Her pretty blue gaze locked onto mine and held. "Hey, girl." The cat reached out a paw and touched my cheek, not even releasing her claws as she did.

It was a huge concession for her and I deeply appreciated it.

I smiled, sniffing loudly. "Thanks, LaLee."

Hal got up to get me some water, and I lay my head back, feeling drained from my cry-athon as well as from the deep sadness spurred inside me by the movie. I'd never understand why people liked to watch sad movies. All they did was drain me of energy and leave me feeling depressed.

My phone rang, making me jump. I glanced at the old-fashioned wall clock above the TV. Eleven o'clock at night. Who in the world would be calling me?

Then I realized it might be my mom and jumped on my cell phone without looking at the ID. "Hello?"

"Joey." His voice was raw, broken, and I sat immediately upright. "Arno? What's wrong?"

Hal came in carrying my glass of water and looked a question at me. I shook my head to let him know I had no idea.

Silence was the only response Arno gave me.

My mind formed a picture of the Deputy lying broken in a ditch somewhere. I gently shoved Caphy off my lap and stood. "Arno, talk to me. Are you okay?"

"She..." Arno took a deep, trembling breath, clearly struggling to say what needed to be said.

I slipped into the flip-flops I'd kicked nearly under the couch. "Tell me where you are. Hal and I will come to you."

Another short silence broke on the sound of Arno clearing his throat. "Twenty-five Sixteen Antler's Way. Hurry."

"We'll be there in five minutes. Arno?"

I waited for him to respond. "Yeah?"

"Whatever it is, it's going to be all right. Okay?"

He took a shuddering breath. "I'm not so sure about that, Joey."

My heart pounded against my ribs. I'd never heard my friend sound so broken. I looked at Hal and he must have seen the worry in my eyes. He nodded, pulling his keys from his pocket. "Come on. I'll drive."

Caphy jumped down from the couch and trotted along behind us as we headed for the front door.

Hal's dark blue SUV waited in the drive at the base of the steps, a dark bulk in the yellow illumination of my porch light. I let Caphy into the back seat and climbed in front as the big car started up with a throaty rumble.

Hal put it into gear and shot around the circle and into the driveway, big tires sending gravel up in a spray as he pulled out onto Goat's Hollow Road. "Where am I going?"

"Head into Deer Hollow. He's on Antler's Way." I thought about the short road that jutted off Main Street just outside of town. It was a residential street, a strange mix of nice homes, broken-down clapboard houses, and a couple of double-wide trailers.

There was something else about the street that niggled, but for the life of me, I couldn't think what it was. "He sounded terrible, Hal."

My handsome PI reached across the space between us and clasped my icy hand in his big warm grip. “Arno’s a strong, capable guy, Joey. Whatever’s going on, he’ll be fine.”

I nodded, clinging to his assurances even though I knew he was just trying to make me feel better. I’d learned when my parents’ plane had gone down that kind words and gentle reassurances could sometimes be a bulwark against total devastation.

As if she could read my mind, Caphy whined softly, settling her heavy head onto my shoulder.

I smiled. “Thanks, girl.” I turned my head and kissed the soft warmth of her wide muzzle.

“Did Arno tell you what’s going on?” Hal asked as we shot past the sign announcing the Deer Hollow city limits.

“No. He was struggling to say anything.” I frowned. That was the thing that scared me the most. He’d sounded so completely devastated. I couldn’t imagine what would take Arno Willager to his knees like that. Hal was right. Arno was strong and capable. I’d rarely seen even the smallest crack in his armor. There were only a few things that had the potential to devastate the deputy that way. Maybe only one.

And at that moment, I had a flash of intuition. I knew why the address sounded so familiar. Arno’s mother lived there.

Hal slowed and turned the SUV onto Antler’s Way. The entire street was only two city blocks long and ended in a cul-de-sac. Straight ahead, in the center of the cul-de-sac, was a worn down double-wide trailer with a separate two-car garage. Lights flashed into the night from three Sheriff’s vehicles that looked like they’d pulled up and skidded to an abrupt stop. I half expected to see deputies squatting behind car doors that stood open as if the cops had lunged from their vehicles and run into an active crime scene, guns drawn.

Hal and I jumped from the SUV, leaving Caphy in the car until I knew what was going on.

She whined unhappily, her big paws slamming against the glass of the side window as we jogged toward the spot where Arno stood, head lowered and hands on his hips.

He was alone in a quiet spot in the night. An island of false calm in a sea of roiling activity. I knew as soon as he lifted his head, his eyes boring into mine, that he was about as far from calm as he could get.

“What’s going on?” I asked softly.

His gaze slid to the pickup truck I hadn’t noticed off to the side. I followed his line of sight and frowned when I saw her. Mrs. Willager stared out at us, her gaze filled with the calm her son couldn’t seem to find.

“Your mother? Is she okay? Do you need us to take her to the hospital?”

Arno shook his head, a single, violent jerk. “I need you to take Spunky to the vet.”

I blinked a few times, completely taken aback by his strange request. “Excuse me?”

Arno scrubbed a hand over his chin, the bristly sound breaking through the silence of the night. “She’s...” He frowned. “I think someone’s poisoned her.” He jerked his head toward a spot on the grass beneath a large tree.

Arno's coat covered something in that spot, a fringe of golden tail sticking out from underneath it. I hurried over and dropped to my knees beside the dog. Spunky's eyes were open and her muzzle was painted in yellow foam. She whined softly as I ran my hand over her wide head. "What's wrong, girl? Are you feeling sick?"

A large form moved up behind me, and I looked up at Hal, tears burning my eyes. "She's really sick."

He nodded, touching my shoulder. "Let me grab her, Joey. We need to get her to Doc Beetle."

Arno showed up behind Hal as I straightened, sniffing. "I already called him. He's expecting her," he said.

Hal scooped up the big golden retriever as if she weighed nothing and headed for his car.

I looked toward the broken-down garage, where Arno's gaze had stuck, his face losing all of its color. Something lay on the broken concrete in front of the rickety structure. The deputies had covered the body with what looked like a painting tarp, but two large boots stuck out from one end.

I looked back at Arno. "Is he the one who poisoned her?"

Arno closed his eyes for a beat, then nodded. He opened his eyes again and fixed them on me. "She killed him, Joey."

"She?" I asked as horror bloomed in my chest. "Spunky?"

He gave a short bark of laughter that had no humor in it. "No. My mom. He poisoned her dog, and she stabbed him with a kitchen knife."

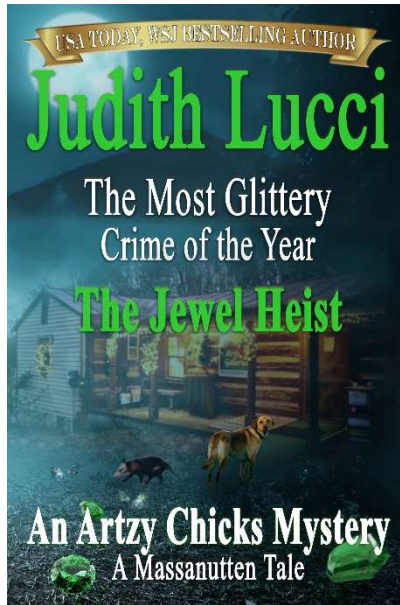
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Judith Lucci

The Most Glittery Crime of the Year – Jewel Heist

Help! There's a Dead body in the Back Yard of the Gallery!

And, to make matters worse, the corpse is the mortal enemy of Lily and LauraLea. The last people to see her alive, were of course, Lily and LauraLea.

Things aren't looking good for the Artsy Chicks when Officer Screech of the Massanutten police begins to ask questions. Then Lily and LauraLea learn the murder weapon was something the lady purchased the night before at the Gallery. Gheeze!

Can their good friend and local medical examiner, Dr. Kenzie Zee and her handsome investigator Benson, keep the Chicks out of jail?

Well, it's gonna be tough!

CHAPTER ONE

I usually don't get to the Artisans Gallery early in the morning, or anywhere early for that matter. I figure that's my reward since I've passed the half-century mark. However, it was my day to "mind" the store, otherwise known as the Artisans Gallery, a unique gallery of incredible art created by Shenandoah Valley artists. Collectively, our artists are known as "The Artzy Chicks" and while we're all uniquely talented, several of us bring the words ditzzy and zany to life. The gallery is housed in a 1700s log hunting cabin in Arboretum Park at Massanutten Resort. The cabin has been added on to and renovated several times, mainly around 1800. The gallery is busy during the spring and summer when the mountain laurel blooms and the kids are out of school. In the fall, the leaf-peepers converge on us like a swarm of locusts. In the winter, we get the ski folks and snow sports enthusiasts. We've found they're not as likely to buy art, but they love to taste wine and drink wine Slushees.

We're also home to a menagerie of animals. We have Gawd Almighty, the possum that was kidnapped a while back, Vino, our yellow lab, and Rembrandt, our calico cat who's tasked to keep the mice down and the snakes under control. Also, Solomon, medical examiner Kenzie Zimbrow's black lab is often part of our animal mix.

Vino greeted me with a slow wag of his tail. He stretched his long, golden body in the summer sun and watched as I approached. He knows the sound of my vehicle. He's a good ole boy who just appeared at the gallery one day. Life here is good for him and he's never disappeared, except for when I take him home to live with me in the winter. We're only open part-time after Christmas because we don't have central heat, and I can assure you it's freezing in that log cabin. The wind chill factor is below zero when the breeze rushes through those hand-hewn logs. When we're open, we huddle around a gas stove and a few electric heaters, and drink endless cups of tea, coffee, or whatever's handy which oftentimes includes mulled wine.

The Artzy Chicks love animals. We each have four or five of our own, and we take turns caring for the gallery's pets. I'm in charge of Vino's vet bills, but so far, he's been healthy which is good because he does have a few vices.

Vino, along with Gawd Almighty, generally hang out on the porch and greet people. Vino ran over to greet me. I reached down, patted his head, and frowned at the pieces of cork in his teeth. His muzzle was stained a dark shade of purple. I groaned to myself. Vino's a drinking dog, a wino canine meaning that he just flat out loves to drink. Every time I take him to the vet, I expect to hear he has pancreatitis or poor liver function, but so far, we've been lucky. I shook my head and wagged my finger in his face. He hung his head. He knew I was gonna fuss at him. In fact, I was gonna bless him out.

“Vino, you’ve been bad. You’ve been in the wine again, and I bet you’ve eaten the corks in the barrel LauraLea was saving for the cork wreath-making class, haven’t you?” I scolded. “She’s gonna be so mad!”

Vino laid his head on his paws and looked away from me. I walked around the back of the cabin, and sure enough, Vino, or some other wild critter from the George Washington Forest, had turned over the barrel of wine corks. Hundreds of corks lay on the ground. I made a face at the lab who watched me carefully from a safe distance. I picked up corks for ten minutes. I threw the badly chewed corks away and salvaged the ones I could. I made a mental note to tell LauraLea, the Diva, to move them into our tiny storage area; that is, if she wanted a wreath class before the holidays.

Oh, before I go any further, let me introduce myself. I’m Lily Lucci. I’m mostly a writer of crime, mystery, and thrillers, but I’m also a watercolor artist and silk painter. I’m also an almost fully retired professor of nursing at a major university. Just today, LauraLea asked me if I’d teach an acrylic painting class. Yuck. Can’t wait. That’s being ugly, and I realize that. For me, touching the brush on the paper with watercolor creates a lovely, magical painting, but filling a brush with heavy acrylic paint and applying it to canvas is hard work. But it’s all great fun. Plus, I love to teach folks to appreciate art and colors. I truly believe that anyone can paint. If you just do it over and over, you’ll become a good artist.

I walked around to the front of the cabin and impatiently jabbed my key into the front door. I rattled the key and turned it right and left. I hate locks and keys, and pretty much any kind of metal or container that keeps me from where I want to be. I think it’s a leftover from my hippy days. Now that I’ve almost retired, I’ve shed the retread hippy look, and returned to my 1960s roots. Finally, through a stroke of luck, I managed to open the door and get into the gallery.

The Diva doesn’t let me work in the galley often because I always seem to mess up the cash register, and I’ve been known to confuse the inventory as well. I do show up a couple of times a week to sign books and teach painting classes; however, I’ll do anything in a pinch if someone is sick or can’t come in. I really don’t mind. I’m sort of a free spirit these days and the gallery is a fun place to work and hang out. Great folks work here, incredible artists hang out here, and even greater people shop here.

Vino followed me around the historic cabin to the front porch and came into the gallery. He knew he was in trouble, so he hung his head and looked pitiful. I relented, as I always do around animals. “Come on out here. I’ll clean your face while I drink my coffee.” I said as I headed toward the old rocking chair on the front porch. “We’ve got forty-five minutes before we open.”

Vino dutifully followed me and waited patiently while I filled his stainless-steel water bowl. He watched my every move, and when I put his bowl on the porch, I must not have placed it correctly, because he nuzzled it to the right with his nose until he had it in the perfect spot. I shook my head as I watched him drink greedily. When he finished, I was happy to see most of the wine cork had washed off his beard and lay in the bottom of his water bowl. I wondered how much wine he’d consumed. Lots of guests buy the Artisans Gallery’s famous wine Slushees and leave part of them in the paper cup for Vino. Oftentimes, they’ll purchase a bottle of wine, place

their glass on the porch or picnic table, and Vino finds and drinks it... to the last drop. I've even seen him turn a bottle on its side and lick the drops off the side. He's also a master at cleaning wine glasses with his tongue until you can't tell if the wine was white or red. He's a mess around wine.

I inspected his mouth and nose. His muzzle was stained pinkish-purple. He obviously preferred the Cabernets, but the truth is he'll drink anything. Lots of times resort guests just give him wine, and there have been times when Vino's clearly been intoxicated. We've had to stop that. Now, we have a sign on the door that says, "Please do not give our dog wine. We know he loves it, but it's bad for him." I wondered if there was a self-help group for dogs with an alcohol problem.

I'd sat down to enjoy the beautiful fall morning with my now slightly cold coffee when Officer Screech roared into the parking lot. I rolled my eyes and wondered what brought him outside so early on a fall morning. Screech flew out of his car before the police cruiser had even cut off.

"Miss Lily, Miss Lily, sumthin's happened," he hollered, his round face flushed with excitement, his brown eyes bright with anticipation and adventure. Even his cowlick stood higher on his head.

"Mornin', Screech," I said calmly as I stroked Vino's neck. I noticed what appeared to be a mustard stain on his shirt and two missing buttons from his Massanutten Police uniform which allowed his stomach to poke out. I'd heard Screech liked the new hot dog and marshmallow place up at the top of the mountain. I forget the name of it, but it used to be a five-star restaurant named Fairways. The Diva and I would go there after a long day of art sales and have their French onion soup, and of course, a good glass of wine. I have no desire to journey up there for a hot dog and toasted marshmallows.

Screech was so animated that he was unable to speak. His eyes looked like they belonged to a wild man. "What's up, Screech? You look excited."

"Is Miss LauraLea here? Is the Diva here?" His voice was eager, his brown eyes poppin' out of his head as he tried to peer through the window in the cabin.

"Nope, just me." For some reason, Screech thought he always had to talk to LauraLea when any of us could help. "Check it out. This is what you get," I said as I pointed at myself. "Now, just spit out what has your knickers in a jam," I directed him.

Screech clearly considered me second fiddle even though I'd been LauraLea's partner when we opened the gallery four years ago. Whether he knew it or not, I still had measurable influence.

He stared at me as though he was afraid to open his mouth.

I tossed my head impatiently, stood, and walked to the door. "Okay, whatever. I've gotta open this place. It's almost eleven," I said as I sipped my now very cold cup of coffee and ruffled Vino's fur. "If you have something to say, you'd better say it because I'm just about out of time." I stared at the deputy.

Screech looked uncertain and he raised his hand to push down his cowlick, a nervous habit I'd noticed he had when he was anxious. "Well, I don't know..." he hesitated. "But, I guess you'll do." He hesitated again and began, "Well, we had this tip... there's a body down the hill and..." Screech covered his mouth and mumbled. "I'd better wait for Miss LauraLea."

I'd had enough. I stood up, grabbed my coffee, and entered the gallery to cut on the seventy-five lamps that illuminated the impressive collection of wall art, antiques, handcrafted wood, jewelry, and everything else you'd find in a fine art gallery plus a wine Slushee machine.

Screech followed me into the cabin and in a loud whisper said, "Miss Lily, we got a body, a DEAD body, and it's in your backyard... right down there," the excited policeman announced as he pointed out the window. "Wanna go with me to see it?"

I stopped in my tracks, turned around, and looked at the deputy. "What did you say?"

"I said we have a DEAD body. Right down there," he said loudly as he pointed to the woods behind the cabin. "Screech was so excited he practically jumped for joy."

I felt my heartbeat pick up. Could there really be a body? A dead one? Massanutten's a five-star, four-season resort that includes a relatively sedate community called Massanutten Village located inside the resort. I don't think we'd ever had a murder at the resort or in the Massanutten community.

"Well, you wanna go see it?" Screech's homely face was bright with the thrill of the moment. "The medical examiner will be here soon. I think she's half-way here from Roanoke," Screech informed me, swollen and puffed up by his self-importance.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Sure, let's go," I said as I let Vino into the gallery and closed the door. If there was a crime scene, I sure didn't want Vino messing it up. He'd probably go down there, spit cork all over the dead person, and screw up everything.

Screech and I walked around the back of the gallery where I saw a couple of wine corks I hadn't picked up. We walked about a hundred yards down the Arboretum Trail. Shortly after that, we reached the collection of blue stone rock next the end of the trail, a stone's throw from the Rockingham Spring house.

Screech was so excited he that nearly skipped through the woods. "Lookie over here," he said excitedly. "Lookie, just look Miss Lily," he bellowed as he waved me forward.

I walked toward him, but he held his hand up for me to stop.

"Halt. Stop. Stop right now, Miss Lily. You can't come no further. This is a crime scene," Screech informed me as he held up his hand.

I shook my head. "I can't see anything, Screech. Why'd you bring me down here?" I asked, a little irritated. "I've gotta open the gallery," I checked my watch.

Screech pulled a roll of crime scene tape from his jacket pocket. He pulled off a yard or so and tossed it to me. "Here, walk where I tell you and we'll mark the scene. I'm the first cop here and it's my job." His voice was inflated with self-importance.

I grabbed the yellow tape and paraded in a circle, walking over damp leaves, moss, and sharp rocks. I followed Screech's commands to a "T." I spotted two deer watching us with

interest, their noses wrinkling and their ears wiggling in the morning sunlight. Then I saw the body.

I'm sure my quick intake of breath and the small sound that escaped from my mouth scared the deer away. I could see the body about forty feet away. It lay by the small pond near some rocks. There were two candles on either side of the victim's head. I knew exactly who it was. I knew the dead person. I recognized her coat. Plus, I saw the plastic bag next to her. It was an Artisans Gallery bag, imprinted with our logo. My heart did a flip-flop. Holy crap! It couldn't be. But... I was sure it was.

"Oh, my goodness, Screech! I know who that is," I said as I struggled to control my breath and the timbre of my voice. "At least I think I do," I said in a quieter, hopefully subdued voice."

Screech nodded as he stood next to me. "Somehow, I thought you would, Miss Lily. The dead lady is someone who's been in your gallery."

"In the gallery; not my gallery," I corrected him. "But yeah, she comes in there all the time and complains about everything we have. She returns most of what she buys." I heard aggravation in my voice. "She was not particularly nice, but I guess we shouldn't speak ill of the dead." I was, if nothing else, a Southern lady, and remembered my manners. I'd been taught many years ago not to speak ill of the dead by my grandmother and my mother. I was still not sure what this Southern mannerism was about. It's not like we have a vote on who gets to heaven. I'm inclined to call things like I see them, especially now.

Screech's not-too-smart eyes bored into mine. I looked back at him. "I'd advise you to not say anything else," he suggested. "I can use it against you, you know." Screech was bloated with importance. "If I feel like it," he said with a wicked grin.

I wanted to flip him off but instead continued to study the body from a distance. "Can I look more closely at the body, Screech? Do you know how she died?"

Screech nodded, "Yep. I think so. Even more importantly, I know the murder weapon," he said with a sly smile. "I know exactly what killed her."

"Can I go closer?" I asked, not sure if I really wanted to.

Screech shook his head. "Nope, not until Dr. Zimbrow gets here. She'll be here soon, maybe 'bout a half an hour. She may let you look."

I nodded. I admired Dr. Kenzie Zimbrow, our local medical examiner. Kenzie was my friend and an honorary "Artzy Chick." Kenzie lived on the mountain and was a great customer at the gallery. She'd taken every art class we offered, and she helped me all the time with forensic details in my crime novels and medical thrillers.

I gave Screech a dirty look. I supposed he was doing his job, but I wondered why he'd dragged me down here in the first place. I guess to help him unroll the crime tape. Then I wondered why the Massanutten Chief of Police had trusted him with an entire murder scene. Somebody must be out sick, or they must be setting up speed traps on the mountain for the locals.

I shrugged my shoulders and flipped my hair back. "Okay, I've gotta go then. I need to open the gallery. I'm sure there's a dozen people on the porch waiting to get in." I turned to leave.

Screech was panicked. “No, no, please Miss Lily. Don’t go. Can’t you stay with me for fifteen minutes or so until Dr. Z gets here?” He asked, a hint of fear in his voice. “I don’t wanna stay here alone.” His brown eyes darted around as he peered through the woods. He pleaded with me, and his arms were outstretched.

I shook my head. Was Screech afraid of the dead person? “No. I’ve got to go. Call another one of Massanutten’s finest,” I suggested. “I’m a writer and artist. I don’t have any real background in crime scenes,” I said although that wasn’t really true. I’d written more crime scenes than most police have investigated. I’d worked with a lot of law enforcement officers over the years. That’s how I knew some of the Massanutten police were a bit sketchy, and trust me, that’s the nicest word I can come up with for them.

Screech’s shoulders sagged. “There’s no one. They’ve all gone to Richmond for some dumb weapons class. I’m alone,” he admitted as he pleaded. “I need you to stay... be my witness, so I don’t get blamed for doing anything wrong,” he confided to me. “Please, Miss Lily. This is my first murder.”

I shook my head. What the devil was I getting myself into? Number one, I knew the victim; she’d shopped at the gallery last night. Number two, the victim had bats in her belfry, and she hated the gallery. And number three, I had a feeling she had one of my crime novels in that Artisans’ Gallery bag. It was possible that the Diva and I were the last two people to see her alive. A dead lady who was a nut case and detested LauraLea and me. This was, for sure, a no win for me.

“Please, Miss Lily.” Screech begged me.

Of course, the dead lady disliked most everyone on the mountain. She didn’t like the gallery either. Nothing about this was good for me, or LauraLea, for that matter, but I was a softie and let my kindness get in the way of my brainpower.

“Okay, Screech,” I consented. “I’ll stay for a little while, but I gotta go up to the gallery and get my phone. I’ve gotta call the Diva or Diane to cover for me. We’ll be swamped in thirty minutes,” I said as I checked my watch.

Screech gave me a grateful look and, for a moment, I forgot how irritating he was. “Thank you, Miss Lily,” he said with a relieved sigh.

I walked back toward the galley and caught a glimpse of red on the ground. I walked off the trail and saw it was a book of matches. I carefully picked it up, touching only the edges. The matches were from the Lonesome Pine Bar in Shenandoah. I’d heard of the place but had never been there. I wished I had a plastic bag. I continued to look for clues on my way back to the gallery, but nothing else caught my eye. “Screech,” I yelled. “I’m gonna close the Arboretum Trail. The last thing you need is a bunch of resort guests traipsing around down here.”

“Good idea, Miss Lily. That’s a really good idea,” he said. “Go for it.”

“Okay,” I said cheerfully. I knew he would never have thought of it.

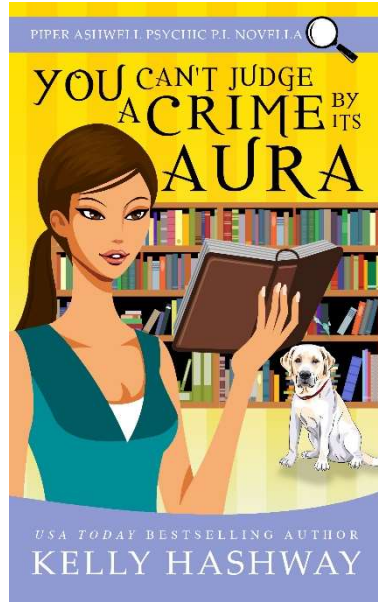
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Kelly Hashway

You Can't Judge a Crime by Its Aura

Psychic P.I. Piper Ashwell has never met a crime scene she couldn't read, but when a murder takes place in the bookstore next to her office, she can't get a good sense of the killer or motivation for the crime.

With the help of well-known thriller author Madison Kramer, who looks so much like the victim it's unnerving, Piper will have to assess the few clues there actually are to track down the killer and save the life of an innocent soul that walks on four legs.

CHAPTER ONE

“Present for you,” Mitchell says, placing a hardcover book on top of my notebook where I’m jotting down places my current client’s cheating spouse has been spotted with his new girlfriend.

I put down my pen and narrow my eyes at him. “You bought me a present?” I ask, calling his bluff.

“Okay, not exactly. It’s from Marcia.”

“Ah, that makes a lot more sense.” I finally allow myself to read the cover. “Running from Murder by Madison Kramer.” I’ve heard that name before. “Isn’t she the author who was all over the news for being mixed up in a bunch of murder cases?”

Mitchell holds up his hands in front of him. “I’m just the delivery man.”

I open the book and flip to the author photo in the back. “Yeah, that’s her. Her parents were murdered in front of her when she was a kid. If I remember correctly, she was even held at gunpoint, but the killer let her go.”

“Oh, man. That’s rough,” Mitchell says, taking a seat across from me. “Marcia said the author will be doing a signing at the store later today. You should bring the book and get it signed.”

Spend my Friday night standing in a line waiting to get a book signed by an author I’ve never read, or go home, veg out on the couch with my sweet Golden retriever, Jezebel, and read this book? It’s not a contest at all. “I’ll pass now that I have a new book to read. Did Marcia put the book on my tab?” I might be the only one with a tab at a bookstore.

“I covered it for you. You can pay me back later.”

I flip to the inside cover to read the price, not that I have cash on me to reimburse him. I virtually never keep cash on me. “Buy you dinner and call it even?” I ask.

“You’re on. What are you working on there?” Mitchell motions to my notebook.

“Cheating spouse. It was almost too easy to catch him in the act.”

“In the act?” Mitchell raises a brow at me.

I roll my eyes and toss the notebook at him. “You’re disgusting. He’s been out with this woman three times since Monday: they had drinks Tuesday afternoon, his car was parked at her apartment for over two hours on Wednesday, and he showed up with flowers to the office building where she works this morning. I’ve got plenty to report back to my client, all confirming what she already knew. She married a colossal jerk.”

Mitchell leans back in his chair. “Well, not every man can be me.”

“Thank the Lord for that,” I say. “So why are you really here? You have a case for me?”

“No. I was just stopping by on my way back from the station.”

I hold my hand out for the notebook, which Mitchell relinquishes. “Detective Mitchell Brennan doesn’t have a date on a Friday night?” He claims to not have had a date in a long time, mostly because he and I have been busy collaborating on cases. I’m slowly winning over some of the police officers at the Weltunkin PD, mostly because Mitchell asks for my help with so many cases. Not that he’s not a competent detective—though I’d never tell him that—but having a psychometrist on hand to read the energy off objects and locate missing persons or uncover how someone was murdered is kind of handy.

Mitchell huffs. “Friday night dates are so cliché.”

“Right.” I drag out the word. “So you happened to stop in Marcia’s Nook because you were looking for a new book to occupy your evening?” We both know there’s no truth in that.

“I was not hitting on Marcia if that’s what you’re implying.”

“Good because like I’ve told you countless times before, she’s too good for you.”

“Duly noted. And for your information, she actually called me.”

I cock my head, my interest piqued. “Do tell.” I lace my fingers on top of the book he brought me.

He dips his head toward the book. “Why don’t you read that and find out why?” He means “read” as in read the energy off it to see what happened between him and Marcia when she gave him this.

“Must we play this game? It would be a lot quicker if you just told me.”

He smirks. “But if I tell you, you’ll assume the worst of me and think I couldn’t resist the opportunity to hit on Marcia after she initiated a conversation.”

I bite my lower lip and consider it for a moment. “That’s true.” I huff, unlace my fingers, and pick up the book with my left hand. After clearing my mind, I close my eyes and transfer the book to my right hand.

“Thank you for coming, Detective,” Marcia says from behind the bakery counter.

“No problem. What’s this plan you need my help with?” He steps up to the counter and rests his forearms on it.

“There’s a semi-local author coming for a signing tonight.”

“Semi-local?”

“She’s from Tillboro Hills. It’s not that far from here. About an hour or so.”

Mitchell nods. “Okay, I’m with you. Go on.”

“Well, I think it would be good for Piper to come to the signing. The woman writes mysteries and thrillers, so it’s right up Piper’s alley. And I think having some human interaction would be good for her. You know how she is. If she’s not working a case, she’s at home in her apartment with Jez. She needs to socialize more.”

Mitchell sighs and stands up straight. “So you want me to convince her to go to the signing.” He shakes his head. “You do realize Piper virtually never listens to me.”

Marcia laughs. “She doesn’t listen to anyone. But you seem to get through to her more than anyone else.”

“I think her father would disagree with that.”

I open my eyes and level Mitchell with a glare. “You got one thing right. My dad would disagree.” Former police detective Thomas Ashwell is the reason I became a private investigator. More so, he’s the reason I started working with the Weltunkin PD. Dad and I made a great team, and when he retired from the police force, he came on as my partner at my P.I. business—though he chooses which cases he wants to work on. He also chooses when he wants to take a long weekend, like he did this week. Hence, I’m working on my own today.

“What do you say, Piper? I promised Marcia I’d do my best to convince you to go. You know how she is.”

She worries about me. Just like Dad does. I can’t seem to convince anyone that I’m fine with my lifestyle exactly the way it is.

“The part I’m not sold on is why she thought you asking me to go would make me want to,” I say.

“I never said I was going,” Mitchell says. “So get any ideas about this being a date out of your pretty little head right now.” He circles a finger in the air in front of my face, and I swat it away.

“Marcia knows better than that. I’d never agree to a date with you.”

Mitchell laughs. “Will you go or not? You can show up early, be the first to get the book signed, and leave.”

That does sound like something I’d do. And it would get Marcia off my case. “Fine. But I’m doing it for Marcia. Not you.”

“Great. Oh, I should probably mention that the signing starts in ten minutes. There’s already a line out the door, so you might want to get over there.” He smirks as he whips out his phone.

“You rat bastard. You set me up.”

“A little bit. Yeah. And I just texted Marcia that you’re on your way, so you better hurry.” He returns his phone to the pocket inside his jacket.

I promised Mitchell I’d never read him against his will again, and I’m not one to break promises. I am, however, the type to get revenge when it’s deserved. I reach forward and grab his watch, closing my eyes at the same time. “Interesting,” I say.

Mitchell yanks his arm away. “What did you see?”

I didn’t actually see anything because I promised not to read Mitchell against his will, so he should know better. But since he’s acting like I broke our agreement, I can’t resist seeing how far I can take this ruse. “Oh, not much. Just that the report you meant to submit to the chief this morning got mixed in the wrong pile at the station because you were distracted by that pretty redhead being questioned by Officer Wallace.”

I know Officer Wallace questioned a redhead this morning because Dad told me. He was down at the station visiting his former coworkers and mentioned seeing Missy Contino there to file a report because her car was broken into. Dad also mentioned Mitchell was distracted by Missy and her tight dress.

Mitchell narrows his eyes at me. “Are you lying?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I shrug, pick up the book on my desk, and stand. “Guess you should call the station and see if your report is where it should be.”

Mitchell doesn’t look convinced one way or the other. “You want me to head to your place and walk Jez for you?”

“You mean after you call the station?” I ask. “Sure. Jez would love that.” My dog is completely infatuated with Mitchell, like most females are. I thought she was smarter than that, but having Mitchell to help me take care of Jez works well for my schedule, so I really can’t complain.

Mitchell gets up and holds my office door open for me. “Have fun at the signing,” he says, motioning up ahead to the large crowd waiting outside Marcia’s Nook.

I push past him, practically marching the twenty-three steps between my office space and the bookstore. “Excuse me,” I say, cradling the book to my chest as I make my way through the crowd. I recognize the boy working the door. He’s one of Marcia’s only employees. The woman is superhuman with how she runs this place practically on her own.

I smile at the kid. “Hey, I’m here to see Marcia. Is it okay if I go in?”

“Yeah, sure, Ms. Ashwell.” He holds the door open for me.

Inside, I look around. There’s a big table with huge stacks of books. I’m a little surprised by how many Marcia ordered. This author must be insanely popular. But then again, judging by the size of the crowd outside, that seems to be the case all right. I spot Marcia talking to a tall man with dark hair next to the table.

When she sees me approaching, she smiles and waves me over. “Piper, I didn’t think there was any way Mitchell would convince you to come.” She looks around me. “Where is he?”

“Walking my dog for me.”

Marcia laughs. “Classic Piper.” She turns to the man she was talking to. “Piper Ashwell, this is Trevor Lockhardt. He’s Madison Kramer’s publicist and fiancé. Trevor, this is my good friend and local private investigator extraordinaire, Piper Ashwell.”

Trevor extends his hand to me. “Nice to meet you, Piper. Tell me, what makes one a private investigator extraordinaire?”

I stare at his outstretched hand. I try not to come into physical contact with people. Sometimes it’s actually harder not to read someone than to try to read them. I never know when that will be the case, so I avoid contact at all costs.

“Oh,” Marcia says, “let me explain.” She places her hand on top of Trevor’s outstretched one, and he lowers it to his side. “Piper is a psychic P.I. She’s a gifted psychometrist.”

Trevor looks confused.

“I can read the energy off objects and people by coming into physical contact with them.”

“I see.” His expression is thoughtful before he says, “I suppose you’re not big on shaking hands then.”

I give a small nod. “You’re a quick study, Mr. Lockhardt.”

Marcia opens her mouth to say something, but she’s cut off by a scream.

“Maddie,” Trevor says, whipping around toward the stacks behind him where the scream came from. He takes off with Marcia and me on his heels.

My senses start tingling the closer we get to the mystery section. This isn’t going to be good.

“Maddie?” Trevor calls again.

“Over here.”

We round the row of books to find a woman in her mid-twenties, standing with her hand to her chest and staring down at a figure on the ground.

“Oh my God,” Marcia says.

I whip my phone out of my purse and call Mitchell. “You need to get to Marcia’s Nook right now. There’s been a murder.”

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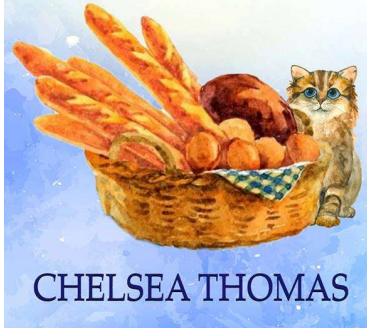
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APPLE ORCHARD COZY MYSTERY BOOK 1.5

A Knead to Kill



Chelsea Thomas

A Knead to Kill

When a local thespian dies on stage during a performance, Chelsea and Miss May leap into action. But they soon learn the mystery goes all the way back to Pine Grove's bootlegging days and uncover a scandal that could unearth a dormant danger that threatens the whole town. Will the girls solve the mystery or will life in Pine Grove change forever?

CHAPTER ONE

Stale Tale

When you hear the words “Big Vermont Bake-off,” does your mind conjure the image of a dead body floating in the center of the deep blue lake?

Neither did mine. Until I attended my first bake-off with Miss May. And found my second dead body.

It was the second weekend in October. Just a few months after I’d arrived home to live with my aunt, Miss May, on the family orchard. And about one month after a disastrous wedding-slash-murder on the Thomas Family Fruit and Fir Farm.

Not to brag, but my aunt and I had teamed up to solve the case of the murdered groom and put the killer behind bars. OK, that was a brag. But it felt good to catch the killer!

Miss May, a sturdy, handsome woman with salty hair and broad features, had long been a yearly competitor at the annual Vermont bake-off. But that year, she had not planned on attending the bake-off, which in her words, “had started to be less bake, more off” in its last couple iterations.

But after the murder on our farm, my aunt had decided we both needed a vacation. Although amateur sleuthing was fun, it was also stressful. Plus, I was still recovering from a disastrous romantic situation with my ex and nothing seemed more relaxing than mass quantities of baked goods in the bucolic north.

So we packed up my aunt’s big yellow VW bus and drove to Chester, Vermont with our friend Teeny riding in the backseat. Teeny had never been to the bake-off before, so she was excited. The closer we got to Vermont, the more excited she became.

“Oh! Look at that beautiful tree,” Teeny said. “I want to give it a hug.”

Miss May laughed. “You talk like we’re not coming from farm country.”

“I know, Pine Grove is rural. But the trees up north seem better. More huggable.”

“You can hug as many trees as you like when we get there,” Miss May said. “But be careful because there’s syrup all over the bark.”

Teeny clapped her hands. “Oooh, syrup! I’m not going to hug those trees. I’m going to lick them.”

“Let’s keep this family-friendly,” I said.

“Nothing unfriendly about licking syrup off the bark of a tree, Chelsea,” Teeny said. “I’m going to eat French toast for every meal.”

“Vermont also has good cheddar cheese,” I said.

“Fine. I’ll eat French toast and cheese. But that’s it!”

“What about my famous apple cinnamon bread?” Miss May asked. “And all the other delicious bread at the bake-off?”

“Fine! I’ll eat French toast, cheese, and unlimited bread,” Teeny said. “But that’s it!”

A few hours later we rolled into Chester, Vermont with drowsy, road-weary grins on our faces. Tucked into the southeast corner of Vermont, Chester was a small, quaint town. Although the surrounding area was pure farmland, a quaint main street ran through the center of town. Bakeries, country stores, and antique furniture shops lined the street. And I spotted more than a few rustic restaurants I wanted to try.

Our hotel, Big Pine Lodge, occupied a large stretch of Main Street. True to its name, the building was a three-story log cabin hotel, with a comical number of crooked chimneys poking from its roof. Pine trees surrounded the building, no surprise there. And a large banner hung between two of the largest pines. “Welcome Bake-off Contestants and Celebrity Judge, George Rivers.”

My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach, where it took a quick break, then continued dropping to the soles of my feet.

“Hold on,” I said, my voice full of dread. “Is George Rivers judging this event?”

Miss May glanced at me. “Yup. The guy from the food channel. Isn’t that cool?”

“No! It’s the opposite of cool.”

“Hot?” Miss May asked.

“You know what I mean,” I said. “George Rivers is the meanest television personality in the history of television.”

“Chelsea is right,” Teeny said. “I hate him. But I love his show! You think he’d give me an autograph?”

“Maybe if you don’t mind him yelling at you,” I said. “Or screaming at you so close to your face he’s spitting in your eyes. Or insulting your family. Or calling you stale.”

Miss May chuckled. “I forgot about that. He calls everyone stale, doesn’t he? It’s his trademark.”

“What a mean trademark,” I said.

Miss May waved me off. “Get over it. We’re going to have a fresh, not stale, time. And I doubt we’ll see George Rivers anyway.”

A hotel employee hurried toward the van to help us unload our bags.

“Now let’s hop out and have some fun,” Miss May said.

Turns out, it’s tough to have fun when an evil British TV personality is yelling at people inside the lobby of your hotel.

That was the scene we discovered as we entered the lodge.

George Rivers was shorter in real life than he appeared on TV. I doubted he was over five feet tall. He wore a tight black t-shirt, black jeans and a gold wristwatch. In his case, the camera must have subtracted ten pounds, because he was stockier than I expected. At that moment in the lobby, he was using every ounce of his stout frame to scold an unsuspecting woman at the registration desk.

“You think you have a chance at winning a contest of which I am the judge? That will never happen. Your recipes are stale, your food is stale, and your face is stale. Stale!”

I would come to know the woman on the receiving end of the tirade as Rebecca Simon, an accomplished local baker. Rebecca was George’s opposite. Tall, slender and poised. She had shiny hair and a Cindy Crawford mole on her left cheek. And she seemed unmoved by George’s insults. “Thank you for your opinion,” she said. “I look forward to the competition.”

Miss May shook her head. “Wow. He’s meaner in real life than he is on TV.”

I nodded. “Told you. Don’t get too close or he’ll call you stale.”

“I’ve been called far worse things,” Miss May said.

Teeny nodded. “She has. I know because I’ve called her them.”

“Is he shorter than you expected?” I asked.

“Yup,” Teeny said. “He’s short but his watch is enormous. Do you see that thing?”

“How could I not?” The watch was gold with a diamond encrusted face. It had to weigh ten pounds. It was so ostentatious it hurt my eyes. “Do you think he wears that while he bakes?”

A woman stepped toward us. “Rumor has it, he never takes it off. Not in the shower. Not while he’s working. Never. The watch is almost as big a celebrity as he is. You don’t remember it from the show?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t watched much of the show. He makes me nervous.”

The woman smiled. “I hope he calls me stale.”

“That’s a strange thing to hope, lady,” Teeny said. “I’ll call you stale, if you want.”

The woman shook her head and stepped back to her place in line. Teeny shrugged. “Her loss.”

Over by the registration desk, George’s argument with the poised stranger crescendoed.

Rivers yelled, “Someone get this woman out of here! Remove her from the premises! She’s insulting my good taste. I’m going stale just standing beside her.”

The woman took a deep breath and steadied herself. “I’m headed to my room anyway. I’ll see you in competition.”

“And I will fail your bread as soon as it rises.”

A few onlookers tittered as the woman slinked away. But I felt bad for her. Little did I know, I would soon feel even worse for George Rivers.

He was arrogant and he was mean. But he had eaten his last loaf of bread and didn’t even know it.

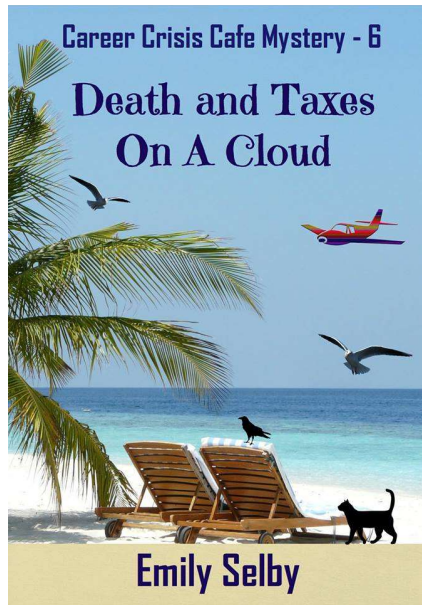
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Emily Selby

Death and Taxes on a Cloud

When Heather Hampton, a budding mixologist, goes away for the weekend, she doesn't expect to be involved in another murder mystery. But since the victim is her new accountant, and the poison is delivered in a dessert from her own café, she has no choice. She rolls up her sleeves, calls on some old friends and gets down to sleuthing. Will Heather and her friends find the murderer before it's too late?

CHAPTER ONE

Heather Hampton left two small cooler bags containing two sets of delicious desserts prepared by her friend and business partner, Josephine Barry, on the cart in the corner of the terminal hall and moved towards the boarding exit. The local airport was small, and the current renovation works had made it even smaller. The parking lot was taken up by machinery, and the space just in front of the main entrance was for drop-off only. Heather had to leave her car at the other end of the road and walk with the coolers.

So inconvenient.

Fortunately, the airport management had prepared for the arrival of their special guests this morning. A spot by the entrance marked 'reserved' had been made ready to accept a van with a group of VIPs: two representatives of a large Chinese- organized travel company and a few local business owners more than keen to develop working relationships with them.

Heather was one of those hopeful, eager business owners. In fact, the special desserts she and Josephine had prepared for the morning's sight-seeing flight had been specially designed to conquer the hearts of the foreign visitors. Josephine had climbed to new heights in her dessert-making skills, producing her own variation on a favorite Chinese Almond Float, and a few examples of Lemons on the Cloud for those who might prefer an alternative.

Heather checked her watch. It was nearly 8.20 am. The guests should be arriving soon. The flight was scheduled to take off at 8.30 am so they could see the beautiful area basking in the glorious, morning light.

However, apart from Heather and a young woman at the check-in desk, who also glanced at the clock, the hall remained stubbornly empty.

A door shut with a thud, and a female voice pierced the silence in the hall. "Oh, I'm sorry,"

"Sorrhy, sorrhy," a male voice followed. A foreign accent.

French?

Heather glanced to her left, in the direction of the restrooms. A hunched, man of medium height hurried away from a young woman wearing a purple and dark gray uniform a little too large for her. The girl disappeared through the door behind the check-in desk, no doubt, a hostess for their chartered flight.

The man approached the counter.

"Someone is locked in ze twalette," he croaked.

Heather pricked her ears.

What was he saying?

"Someone is where?" the check-in girl asked.

"Ze twalette," the man repeated, pointing at the door to the toilet.

"Oh, someone's stuck in the toilet? Male or female?" the check-in girl asked.

"Of course, male. I do not enter female twalettez," the hunched man replied.

"I'll send someone to help," the check-in girl said, and disappeared through the door behind her.

The man shuffled away, towards the back of the hall.

A car honked outside the main entrance. Heather craned her neck.

The white shuttle van, no doubt carrying the guests from Dolphin Cove and the villages nearby.

A phone rang somewhere in the back room, where the young woman had disappeared to. Someone must have answered it, as the ringing ceased.

A moment later, a man in a pilot's uniform emerged from the back room, followed by another man wearing green overalls. They headed for the male bathroom.

The rescue was on its way.

The check-in girl reappeared from the room and returned to the desk.

"The owner of a silver Toyota Corolla, registration number..." she rattled off the number, reading it off the piece of paper she was holding.

Heather covered the smile creeping onto her lips with her hand, which still smelled of lemon. What was the point of the announcement, since the tiny airport was empty?

The girl's words echoed around the vacant hall.

No response, of course.

Ah, wrong!

The hostess darted out of the back room and headed for the main entrance.

An air hostess mis-parked her car? Really?

Heather shrugged; this was not her problem. Well, as long as the guests reached the departure lounge and boarded that airplane.

She shifted her gaze to the other side of the small hall. The airplane, a chartered 19-seater was standing on the dark surface, with the mobile staircase already deployed.

But the refreshment cart was still in the hall. She jerked her head towards the back of the room, by the side door.

Yep!

Heather's back tensed. The desserts had to get on board this airplane. Career Crisis Café had been chosen to cater the new tours. Assuming, Mandy Chen's company won over the Chinese guests.

Heather wanted Mandy Chen's company to win them over, and so did every single person who was now walking through the main entrance.

At the same time, the bathroom door reopened, letting out the pilot and the man in the overalls, who were followed by a slightly distressed-looking young man in similar green overalls. The first two headed back to the room. The young man hurried to the cart, pushed it through the boarding exit, and out onto the airfield.

The hall filled with loud voices and unusual energy.

The first people to approach the counter were Mandy Chen and her husband, Jon. Mandy, a petite, slim, Chinese woman, looked glamorous in a shift dress, white shirt underneath and a pair of black pumps. Definitely dressed up for the occasion, just as her Kiwi husband, who was sporting a light brown summer suit and a pair of sunglasses. They were closely followed by two gentlemen in dark suits - the reps of the Chinese travel agency, judging by their appearance.

Heather glanced at her feet, which were clad in a pair of comfortable flat-heel pumps, and covered with the long legs of her dark blue linen slacks. The dark blue slacks matched her jacket. A cream short-sleeve blouse completed her the-most-formal-I-could-find-in-my-summer-wardrobe look. She'd probably find something more business-like in one of the multiple, still unpacked, cardboard boxes stored in her bedroom. But she didn't want to.

She'd moved on from that former life of a fashion journalist and no longer had to wear high heels and fancy clothes.

Heather relaxed her back. The remaining guests started to form a queue to the check-in desk. All of them locals, and hence, much more casual in their attire.

Well, except one.

Heather cringed and turned away to avoid meeting the gaze of a suit-clad elderly man, who had just shuffled from the entrance and joined the back of the line. Charles Pritchard, Heather's savior-cum-worst-nightmare, a semi-retired accountant. He had been helping her with a recent audit from the tax office, driving her nuts with his billions of questions over every number in the book, fussing over "4s" that looked like "1s", and "1s" that looked like "7s", and God knows what other sins.

Heather turned away, watching the young man in green overalls load her cooler bags and probably other refreshments on board.

She'd check in last. Anything to avoid having a conversation with Charles.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," the girl at the check-in desk said through her microphone. "We are now boarding the chartered flight around the Bay of Islands, Far North and back."

The check-in process progressed quickly. After all, there were only fifteen of them, including Heather.

Once the last passenger, the unknown young man Heather had spotted talking to Mandy, approached the desk, Heather crossed the hall and joined him.

Once on board, she took her place towards the back of the small airplane. The seats were arranged in two single rows. Two Chinese businessmen took the seats in the front, with Mandy and Jon sitting behind them. The next row belonged to the owners of two large hotels in Dolphin Cove, men whose names Heather had forgotten. In the next row sat the Mayor, Wiremu, and Adam Carter, the local tourism specialist. The following row was taken by two women: Mrs. Knoblauch, who ran one of the biggest restaurants in Dolphin Cove, and Ruby Hathaway, the town board secretary. Then, two seats ahead of Heather, sat Jack Settler and his son who operated cruise boats, offering trips around the bay and swimming with dolphins. The emergency

seats in front of Heather were empty. Well, the one to her left housed the cooler bags, or 'chilly bins', as Josephine called them.

The seat across from Heather was empty, too - there was another guest who couldn't attend. The last two seats were occupied by the young, dark-skinned man who boarded before Heather and Charles Pritchard, who sat behind her.

Heather sank into her seat, trying very hard to blend into the soft, plushy cover.

Why Charles was even here? According to Heather's intelligence, Charles had retired from Mandy's business, long ago and had no current dealings with her.

Maybe he'd wrangled himself an invitation a long time ago?

Heather released a breath, determined not to let the presence of the annoying man spoil her trip. She wanted to soak in the beauty of the landscape from the air, but also wanted to observe the reactions of the guests to their new desserts.

As agreed with Mandy, the organizer, the refreshments were to be served on the return trip. The aircraft took off.

Shifting her gaze between her own window and the spot across in front where the coolers were, Heather admired the view. Below, the blue waters of the Bay of Islands glimmered in the morning light. Boats bobbed at anchor in the harbors or cut through the waves, leaving white tails of foam behind.

To the left, the vast spread of lush green tried to match the paradise feel of the sea.

They had to fall in love with it.

It was what Mandy Chen-Walker had been repeating ever since she'd suggested that Heather and Josephine joined her in the efforts to attract business from the far-flung economic powerhouse.

Fair enough, the locals would have to adjust to the tastes of their guests and learn at least some simple phrases in Mandarin, but that was actually great. Learning and development was good. Their region had a lot to offer, Dolphin Cove businesses were more than ready for the change. According to Mandy, Chinese tourists were hungry for new experiences, new sights, new tastes. This trip was their opportunity to shine.

And so they would.

The captain rattled on about the speed and the height of the flight. Then, Mandy took the microphone and greeted the guests, in Mandarin and then in English. Today, she was the hostess and the interpreter, and she had prepared extremely well.

With a little help from Adam, Mandy presented the key landmarks they were passing by: the Hole in the Rock and the other islands in the bay; the Treaty of Waitangi grounds, the birth place of New Zealand as a country; and the deep-green stretch of Waipoua Forest, home to mighty kauri trees, which slept in serene beauty.

And then, at the other edge of the island, the golden strip of Ninety Mile Beach, with its sands stretching along the coast, until it reached the top of the North Island, where, according to the aboriginal people, Maori, the spirits of the dead jumped off to journey back home. Once the

airplane reached the tip - Cape Reinga, with its picturesque little lighthouse marking the end of the slither of land – it turned around and headed back.

Mandy announced the refreshments. The flight attendant reached to her cupboard at the front of the cabin. She was supposed to serve soft drinks, starting from the back, while Heather took care of the desserts, starting at the front.

Heather unbuckled her seatbelt and rose to her feet.

She put the strap of the first cooler over her neck, opened the bag and started to serve.

Most guests were keen to try the Chinese dessert - Almond Float. She emptied the first bag as she approached the last two passengers. She switched the coolers.

"What would you like, sir?" Heather asked the young man. His brown eyes were distracted, as they darted between the window and the screen of his mobile phone, which sat on the open tray in front of him.

"Any nuts in it?" he asked glancing at her. His voice sounded strained.

"Only almond flavoring," Heather replied. Josephine had been careful to keep the dessert preparation free of any potential allergens.

"What else do you have?"

"Lemons on the cloud."

"No nuts?"

"None at all," Heather replied confidently. "It's dairy though."

"That's okay," he replied and returned to staring at his screen. She put a small, plastic container on his tray.

Heather took a deep breath and forced a smile onto her aching lips.

"And for you, Mr. Pritchard?" she asked the older man.

His bushy eyebrows drew together, forming a strong line on his broad forehead.

"And what have you got there, Ms. Hampton?"

Every decision seemed to be a major battle for him. To avoid the endless hesitation and a flood of questions she should limit his options, really. She'd learnt that even two were one too many.

"Actually, I only have Lemons on the Cloud left. Would you like a portion?"

"What's inside?"

Heather tensed her shoulders.

"Lemon curd, crackers, yogurt cream. It's all homemade by Josephine," she added quickly.

"Okay then."

Heather fished out a correct pot from the cooler and handed the dessert across.

"I'd better secure my chilly bins before we start descending," she said, before the accountant could open his mouth.

Back in her seat, Heather clicked the seatbelt back on.

Oh, I've forgotten to serve myself...

Never mind. She'd help herself to one of the leftover portions once she got home to their café. She didn't want to risk another opportunity for Charles Pritchard to bombard her with

questions. Soon, the airplane would start descending. She had already arranged for the flight attendant to collect the empty pots together with the glasses.

Finally, Heather could sit back and relax again, staring at the glimmering landscape beneath the wings, praying that the Chinese travel agents loved it as much as she did.

Once the flying machine was taxiing on the airstrip again, Heather flexed her shoulders a few times.

Judging by the excited tones in the voices coming from the front of the cabin, the guests must have been at least satisfied with the trip. She could only hope that Josephine's dessert was one of the reasons.

The airplane rolled to a halt. The engines whirled for a while longer and then stopped. The attendant, looking a little unsure of herself, announced the door being opened.

The noises at the front intensified. Heather waited.

Once everyone but Charles Pritchard left the cabin, Heather climbed to her feet. She definitely preferred her accountant to march out of the airplane well ahead of her.

"Mr. Pritchard, we need to deplane," she said, without looking at the man.

There was no answer.

Heather forced herself to glance at him.

"Oh, you've fallen asleep," she said, her heart dropping to the floor. She'd have to wake him up, and then she'd be forced to walk back with him.

"Mr. Pritchard, it's time to leave the airplane," Heather said, louder.

The man didn't even flinch. She bent and touched his shoulder.

"Hello," she said.

Still no answer.

She rubbed her knuckles on the top of his shoulder joint.

"We've landed, Mr. Pritchard."

The man remained as motionless as before.

Heather's heart skipped a beat. She put the back of her hand half an inch away from his nostrils and his mouth.

No air movement.

She grabbed his wrist and pressed two fingers against the spot where the pulse should have been.

There wasn't one.

"Anything wrong?" a female voice asked behind her.

Heather swiveled her head to face the flight attendant who must have re-entered the aircraft. Despite the heavy makeup, her young, freckled face looked pale.

"I'm not sure, but I think, he's dead..." Heather croaked.

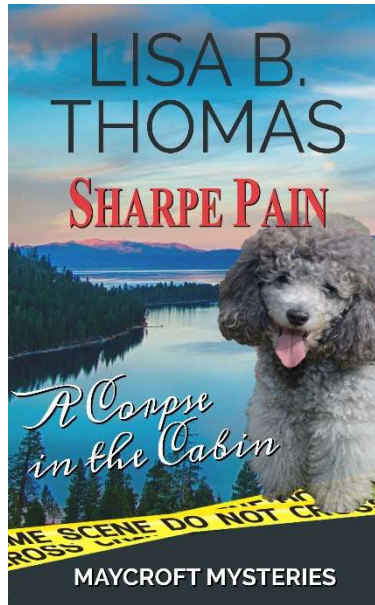
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Lisa B. Thomas

Sharpe Pain: A Corpse in the Cabin

Retired teacher Deena Sharpe and her husband plan the perfect getaway to a Lake Tahoe resort which includes a sunset dinner cruise on a restored yacht.

But when they find a dead passenger in the captain's cabin, the finger pointing between the on-board wedding party, a few quirky couples, and a Gilligan's Island trio has everyone ready to jump ship!

CHAPTER ONE

Deena's husband, Gary, had always been the strong one—her rock. So, when he went out of commission on this rocky adventure, it was up to her to soldier on by herself.

It wasn't that Gary was perfect, he was just perfect for Deena. And when she surprised him with a short vacation, she was ready for his resistance. Mainly, she knew he would insist he was too busy at work to take any time off. That's why she paid for the whole thing in advance. She knew he would never back out if the money was already spent.

The brochure promised a romantic Sierra Nevada getaway with a private beach on beautiful Lake Tahoe with park-like grounds, perfect for couples. Deena chose the Golden Empire Resort because of its all-inclusive spa. She knew Gary would like it for its world-class, smoke-free casino. As a financial adviser, you'd think Gary would be opposed to all types of gaming due to its unpredictability. Not so. He was one of those people fascinated by the apparent randomness of it all and had a sense that with enough study, he could crack the code and master the mayhem.

The first four days of their trip had gone by so quickly. They'd visited the local antique shops and boutiques in town and had eaten delicious meals in small intimate restaurants Deena had chosen when she'd first planned the trip. They'd hiked around part of the lake on beautiful scenic trails. It was Gary's idea to try out the peddle boats. After all, it looked so easy on the smooth, shining water. But after a full five minutes, Deena had gotten a cramp in her leg, and Gary had to solo peddle the rest of the way alone.

Exercise wasn't what it was cracked up to be.

On Friday morning she woke up filled with anticipation. It was their last day in Tahoe and the day she was scheduled in the spa. The sunset dinner cruise was also that evening. It would be the perfect ending to a perfect getaway. Gary was more relaxed than she'd seen him in a long time. They kissed goodbye outside their hotel room and headed their separate ways—her to the spa and him to the casino.

Just as she had hoped, it was a day of bliss . . . almost.

The masseuse seemed like someone employed to rough up snitches for the mob. The hot rocks felt like they'd come straight from the lava pit. And the pedicure? Let's just say when the woman pulled out the extra large cheese grater, the fun and games were over.

But in the end, she looked great and smelled even better. She's survived and was ready to surprise Gary with her full body make-over.

* * *

Deena decided not to call Gary on his cell phone in case he was back in the room taking a nap or laying by the pool. But just in case, she decided to look for him in the casino, although she couldn't imagine he'd still be there.

As she wove her way through the casino's maze of green felt and flashing lights, Deena homed in on Gary, still seated at the same slot machine where she'd checked on him hours earlier. After this much time, he was either a millionaire or they would be taking out a second mortgage on the house.

He sat slumped forward toward the machine that promised big bucks and no whammies. As she sat in the chair next to him, he said something that sounded like 'sup and didn't even look up.

"What do you think?" Deena held her chin up and vogued with her hands, showcasing her newly-made up face. She waited. "Well?"

"You look nice, as always," Gary mumbled as he moved his face her direction without taking his eyes off the brightly-lit screen in front of him.

"Hey! I'm talking to you," she said with an uncharacteristic edge in her voice. She hadn't been through the Hall of Torture for nothing.

Gary let out a deep sigh and turned, leaning in to kiss her cheek.

"Stop!" she said and back up a step. "Don't touch me. I just spent the entire day getting a massage, facial, manicure, pedicure, and my make-up done. I don't want you to mess it up."

"Oh. Nice." He smiled and peered at her through red-rimmed eyes. Then he rotated his head to stretch his neck.

Deena could sense the tension emanating from her usually relaxed husband. "Have you been sitting in this same place since I left?"

"No," he said defensively. "I went to the bathroom — twice."

Oh my. This wasn't the Gary she knew. "How did you do, money-wise that is? Am I going to have to start working at the newspaper full-time?"

"Nah. I only lost six bucks. It's infuriating." He punched a button and his receipt popped out.

"That's a relief. Let's go. It's time to head to the dock for the Sunset Dinner Cruise."

"Do I have time to take a shower first?" Gary stood up and then let out a moan followed by an audible gasp.

Deena jumped up. "What is it?"

"My back." Gary stood hunched over and put his fist in the small of his back.

Deena felt a twinge of sympathy but only for a moment. "Wait a gosh darn minute, mister. You're not trying to get out of this excursion, are you? I've been looking forward to this night all week."

Gary took in a few slow breaths. "Not at all. You know I wouldn't do that. But my back..."

As she realized her husband was in actual pain, Deena felt guilty and helped him lower himself down onto the chair, all the while being mindful of her freshly painted nails.

"I just need a few aspirin," he said, "and I should be fine."

Deena opened her tote bag wide enough so Gary could reach in, not daring to do it herself and possibly nicking a nail. “Look in that Vera Bradley pouch. There are some pain killers from my last emergency room visit. One of those should do the trick.”

“Which one is the Vera Bradley?”

“The pink floral one.”

A waitress walked up holding a tray of glasses. “Here’s your beer, Mr. Sharpe. Should I add it to your room tab?”

“Sure,” he said and took the glass. He downed the pills with the drink.

“We need to get going,” Deena said. “I want to get good seats on the yacht. This might be my one and only chance to feel like an Onassis.”

She helped Gary stand, and they slowly made their way to the exit. They walked toward the pier where the majestic Vagabond II sat moored to the dock. It was smaller than it looked in the brochure.

Deena stared at the vast, shiny lake and couldn’t wait to feel the cool breeze on her skin and watch the sun slowly dip its toes into the inky water below. Suddenly she stopped. “Wait. Do you have my gift?”

“Huh?” Gary’s face was a mixture of pain and confusion.

“You said you had a surprise for me. This is our last night in Tahoe, so I assumed you were giving it to me here.”

“Oh that. Yeah, I’ve got a surprise.”

Deena grinned and led the way. She wondered what the surprise might be. She reached up and touched the amber pendant he’d gotten her on their last anniversary. Maybe he’d bought her the matching ring or earrings. After her previous gift of a couples’ membership to a gym, Gary seemed to have learned his lesson and was sticking to jewelry.

As they approached the end of the dock, another couple sat on a bench next to the rope blocking the entrance to the boat. When they saw Deena and Gary moving slowly their direction, they both hopped up and waved as though they were greeting their best friends.

“Ahoy there, matey! We are Bob and Phyllis Hooper from Nashville.” Bob shot out his hand, then seemed to notice Gary was struggling. “What’s the matter there, fella? You seem to be all in a twist.”

“Just a little back strain,” Gary said and stuck out his hand to Bob. He winced slightly as Bob shook it vigorously. Gary took a seat on an adjacent bench.

Deena smiled at the couple who were even more excited about the cruise than she was. “Hi. I’m Deena and this is Gary.”

The woman smiled, bounced over and gave Deena an unexpected hug. She was a little younger than Deena. Early fifties with curly auburn hair held back with a headband. She wore black capris with a green alligator print and a coordinating top. Her outfit screamed tourist and she smelled of coconut oil.

“What? No last name?” Phyllis asked with a twinkle in her brown eyes. “Are you two on a secret tryst or something?” She giggled and her curls bounced.

It wasn't the kind of thing you would normally ask strangers, but Deena brushed it off. "No," she said, backing away to take a seat next to Gary. "We're married. We just decided to get away from the Texas heat."

"Texas? Oh, how exciting!" Phyllis wedged herself between Deena and the bench's armrest. "Do you know that home-designing couple from Texas? I just love them. Never miss an episode. Maybe we could come for a visit some time and meet them!"

Deena tried to scoot further away, but there was no room. "Actually, we live in a different part of the state. But Gary and I have been to Nashville. We saw a concert at the Ryman Theatre. I'm sure you've been there."

"Oh, Bob and I don't get out much. Big concerts like that don't interest us."

Deena started to say something about how the Ryman was an intimate setting for a concert since it used to be a church, but Phyllis interrupted.

"We like staying in. Not tonight, of course. We are out tonight. Aren't you excited about this excursion? I just know we are all going to have so much fun!"

Great. So the Hoopers were one of those overly-friendly couples who never left you alone and never stopped talking. They were like gnats who buzzed around annoying everyone within arm's length of them.

"You bet we're going to have fun, baby." Bob walked up and pulled Phyllis off the bench. He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a big, wet kiss that would make even the most liberal onlooker blush. His hand moved down to her backside and pinched up a big helping of alligator pants.

Deena started to look away just as a yapping sound came from Phyllis's over-sized tote.

"Hush, Sophie." Phyllis stuck her hand in the bag and looked at Deena pleadingly. "You won't tell, will you? Sophie is an old dog. She's a toy poodle, and I just couldn't leave her alone all evening in the hotel."

Deena stared at the head of the furry gray pooch. "But this is a boat. Where will she . . . go?"

"Oh, she's paper trained," Phyllis crooned proudly. "I'll take her into the bathroom when she needs to go. She won't be any bother to anyone."

Deena loved dogs, especially her rescued terrier, Hurley.

But before Deena could answer, Bob butt in. "You know, I use to go to a chiropractor now and again back home." He reached toward Gary. "Maybe I can give you a little jerk."

"No thanks," Gary said quickly and put his hands up to stop the guy from man-handling him. "I just took something. I'll be fine in a few minutes."

"Suit yourself," Bob said and shoved his hands into his plaid bermuda shorts. He was older than Phyllis and obviously wore a toupee. Not a bad one, but still noticeable. His face had an unnatural orange tint, as though he'd used a cheap instant-tanning product.

Something about the couple bothered Deena, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. It didn't really matter. She'd never see these people again after tonight.

Or so she thought.

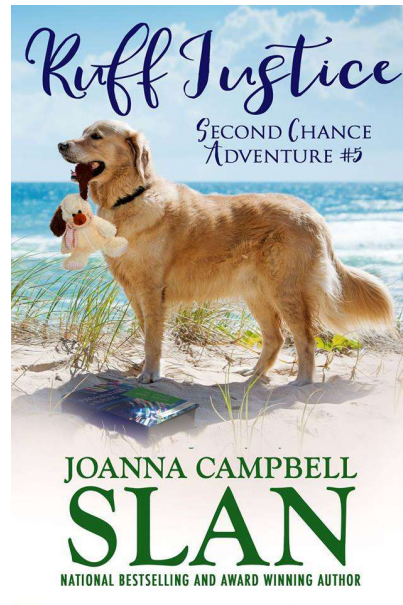
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Joanna Campbell Slan

Ruff Justice

Amateur sleuth Cara Mia Delgatto has a "ruff" case on her hands. A wealthy matron has told everyone who will listen that upon her death she's leaving Ginger, her beloved Golden Retriever, to her young caregiver, Parker. When the woman dies under suspicious circumstances, Parker is the number one suspect. But Parker swears she is innocent, and it is up to Cara to clear the girl's name and give Ginger a second chance at a Forever Home.

CHAPTER ONE

Getting old isn't for sissies. Truer words were never spoken.

Given that the average age of South Florida matrons is between mud and God, senior citizens are an everyday occurrence in my store, The Treasure Chest. Seniors often rely on walkers, many with yellow tennis balls stuck to the bottom of the metal legs. Wheelchairs are a close second when it comes to senior mobility aids. Recently, canes with three legs have become popular, and that's an innovation that I applaud. Unlike the wheelchair and walker users, the person with an enhanced cane can navigate narrow spaces. The tripod base offers better stability than a singular leg.

Brooke Porter Delahunty used her new cane as a stylish fashion accessory. She'd found one in a metallic hot pink, which made it impossible to ignore. Of all my elderly customers, Mrs. Delahunty is one of the most pleasant. I always enjoy her visits. Mrs. Delahunty is unfailingly cheerful. That might not seem like a big deal, but a lot of our senior citizens seem to think that being old gives them a pass on being rude and nasty. Not Brooke Porter Delahunty. She will live and die as a gracious lady, admired for her upbeat demeanor and her terrific good taste. Mrs. Delahunty wears her white hair in a stylish bob. She's never seen in public without her makeup, and her clothes are classic without being dull.

When I first met Mrs. Delahunty's caregiver Nina Stevens, I thought they made an odd couple. Back then, Nina had dyed her hair green for St. Patrick's Day. Shall I say it was a daring choice? Indeed it was. Not only was the color shocking, the treatment must have been severe because one month after St. Paddy's, most of Nina's hair had broken off. She looked like a chia pet, one of those terracotta figurines designed to grow chia sprouts in the place of hair. (Chia pets are a 1970s fad that's blessedly been forgotten by most of us.)

That was almost four years ago. Today, Nina looks like a normal person. Her beleaguered hair has resumed a natural shade, and someone has since given it a snazzy cut that flatters the young woman's face. Much has changed in Nina's life. When we first met, she'd been hired through an agency as Mrs. Delahunty's part-time caregiver. Today, Nina is full-time, a fixture at the side of the elderly matron. As always, Nina danced careful attendance on her client.

The two women interacted more like a mother and adult daughter than a wealthy widow and her hourly wage minder. Over the months my store, The Treasure Chest, had been open, I'd seen Mrs. Delahunty and Nina countless times, their heads nearly touching as they discussed my merchandise. Nina looked at her employer with the sort of admiration and affection that a grandchild might offer a doting grandmother. In return, Mrs. Delahunty was Nina's most ardent cheerleader.

“Nina and I are celebrating,” Mrs. Delahunty told me as she reached for her caregiver and gave the girl a one-armed hug. “She had all of her final exams last week but one, organic chem, and I’m positive she’ll pass that with flying colors. Only one more semester to go until she graduates. Then it’s on to nursing school.”

I congratulated Nina. Working full-time and getting an education had to be a struggle, and I said as much.

“Mrs. Delahunty has helped a lot. She’s my best study aid.”

That was surprisingly, but on reflection, it made perfect sense. To Brooke Delahunty, Nina was a surrogate daughter. Why wouldn’t she help the girl achieve her dreams?

“What do you think?” Nina tried on one of the leather bracelets we sold and modeled it for Mrs. Delahunty.

“Hmm. With your camo pants? Or the new cargo pants in beige? If you wear the cargo pants, you’ll need a medium- to dark-hued top, I think. Although I suppose that beige on beige is all the rage right now. Whatever you choose, I love the idea of leather and organic pieces with casual clothes.” Mrs. Delahunty smiled at Nina fondly. The two had endless discussions about fashion. Not only was it a shared passion, but staying in touch with changing styles tickled Mrs. Delahunty. At the same time, her insights improved the way that Nina looked.

“Those leather bracelets are handmade. We collect the seashells from our local coastline. The stones were found on various beaches from around the area,” I explained.

“They are wicked,” Nina said. In the parlance of her age-group, “wicked” meant she liked it. Very carefully, she hung the bracelet back on the jewelry display rack. Skye Blue, my bestie and an employee, is the creative force behind many of our offerings. Her work with natural materials is much admired by our customers.

I went back to counting the merchandise in our candle and scented oil department while Nina and her client took their time, looking around my store. Straightening and tracking inventory is a tedious part of owning a retail store, but it must be done. Happily, I can do these menial chores and eavesdrop, so the time goes quickly. I especially enjoyed hearing the discussion between Nina and Mrs. Delahunty.

As I understood it, Brooke Delahunty had once worked for a fabulous fashion magazine in New York City. She’d given up her career when she married an entrepreneur who’d made millions fitting cars with airbags. Although she has long since quit working out of an office in the big city, she’s gone on to organize all sorts of charity events, as women of a certain station are expected to do. She’s also maintained a lifelong interest in clothes and makeup, as exhibited by her perfectly groomed and dressed appearance. I’d heard that the Delahunty home was a tribute to her good taste. Supposedly, she had decorated the place by herself, which is unusual for a person of such wealth. Typically, rich folks bring in a designer, even if they claim to do most of the decorating themselves.

“Cara? I think Nina’s decided on this bracelet,” Mrs. Delahunty sang out to me.

“Coming!” I put down my clipboard and hurried to the cash wrap station.

“No, Mrs. Delahunty, don’t,” Nina protested. “Honest. Just because I like something doesn’t mean you need to buy it!”

But Mrs. Delahunty had made up her mind. “It’s my money and I’ll do what I want with it! I hope you will wear it in good health, Nina, and it will remind you that you can do whatever you put your mind to doing.”

I took the bracelet from Nina and rang it up. As I wrapped the trinket in tissue paper, I realized someone was missing. “Where’s Mally?” I glanced around my store. Usually, Brooke Delahunty’s Golden Retriever was at her side, accompanying her mistress and the caretaker when they popped in and out of shops in Downtown Stuart. Although Mally is fast becoming a senior citizen herself, she’s very much an integral part of Mrs. Delahunty’s life. Wherever Brooke Delahunty goes, her dog goes too.

“Mally is getting groomed at Pretty Pet. She’s been shedding like crazy.” Nina grinned. Her hazel eyes twinkled at the mention of Mrs. Delahunty’s dog. Rumor has it that one of the reasons that Mrs. Delahunty had hired Nina was the girl’s immediate bond with Mally. The dog is an important part of Mrs. Delahunty’s life, and more than one caregiver had been rejected after taking exception to the amount of pampering that Mrs. Delahunty gives her pooch. Mally goes for regular walks. She eats organic food. She drinks only Figi water. In short, the yellow dog leads a charmed life, even if you compare her existence to that of most human beings.

“They do a nice job of grooming her, but I hate those ugly bandanas they put on poor Mally.” Mrs. Delahunty frowned. “They must buy their material from the kids’ section of the fabric store. Disney characters are well and good, but not on my dog. Same with the Simpsons. The show is amusing, but the images are garish.”

That gave me an idea. “That’s a good point, Mrs. Delahunty. Most dog scarfs are pretty stupid looking, aren’t they? If I had doggy bandanas made in more expensive fabrics, would you be interested?”

“I certainly would. Mally needs an entire wardrobe of bandanas. How about one in a tropical prints? Another in a damask? And perhaps subtle pink with a cotton lace? A variety for every occasion.” Mrs. Delahunty paused and mulled over the idea. “Even a camo scarf with leather and shells. Hip can be wonderful, if it’s done tastefully.”

I’d never seen doggy bandanas in fashionable fabrics. Usually they’re made up in cheap and ugly remnants that could only be described as “cute,” with a huge emphasis on the quotation marks surrounding that one word. While I watched Mrs. Delahunty sign her credit card slip, I calculated that I could have a new order of bandanas on my shelves in less than a week. I have an ace seamstress who works for my store, and she could whip up doggie neckerchiefs in no time at all.

“Mrs. Delahunty, Nina? If you two come back next week, I promise I’ll have more options for you to consider. I am positive we can dress Mally in style. How’s that for a plan?”

Mrs. Delahunty beamed at me. “That’s wonderful. Absolutely spot on. Oh! Nina, we almost forgot to give Cara her invitation! Aren’t we silly? Cara, we’re having a small soiree at my house

to celebrate Mally's tenth birthday. I do hope you'll come. You're one of the first people we thought of when we decided to host this event. I know you're committed to rescuing animals."

Nina reached inside the backpack she carried for Mrs. Delahunty and withdrew an ivory envelope with my name written in a graceful script.

The invitation was pure Brooke Delahunty. The notepaper had been embossed. A message in metallic gold invited me to Mally's birthday party, three weeks away. A smaller card tucked inside gave directions to the Delahunty home.

"Mrs. Delahunty, I didn't realize you live on Jupiter Island. We're practically neighbors. I'm in the house that Mrs. Fingersmith used to own." At first, I couldn't believe the coincidence. Then I gave myself a mental dope-slap. Of course Brooke Delahunty lived on Jupiter Island. The small community is home to many of the country's most prominent families, including such old guard names as the Bushes, Doubledays, and the DeWitts. Legendary golfers live there too, so one is apt to run into Tiger Woods and Greg Norman. Unlike Palm Beach, the residents of Jupiter Island prefer to keep their lifestyle low-key. They eschew glamor and glitz in favor of solitude and safety.

"My goodness, Cara. I didn't know you were nearby. I wondered who'd moved in to that little cottage. It's so charming! I'm glad to hear you're down the street from me."

The card suggested that instead of bringing a gift for Mally, guests could make a donation to the local no-kill shelter. That was right up my alley.

"This is a splendid idea!" I waved the invitation at the two friends. "I would be delighted to join you. Thanks for the invitation. Consider this my RSVP. I love no-kill shelters. Such a worthy cause."

"Mrs. Delgatto confirmed," Nina spoke into what looked like a large memory stick attached to her keychain. When she saw the quizzical look on my face, she said, "Voice activated recorder. I use it for school and when I have Mally on her leash."

"Smart idea." I admired the young woman's ingenuity.

Mrs. Delahunty took the bracelet out of the bag I'd provided. Gesturing to Nina, she indicated that the younger woman should thrust out her arm. With trembling fingers, Mrs. Delahunty secured the bracelet to Nina's wrist.

"There you go, sweet child. Enjoy."

Nina planted a quick kiss on the side of Mrs. Delahunty's face. "You're too kind to me. Honestly, Mrs. Delahunty. You spoil me."

"Harrumph," Mrs. Delahunty grumped. "Someone should spoil you. You're a wonderful young lady. I'm lucky that you're a part of my life. Before you came along, I had a series of dreary women without the brains that God gave geese. You keep my mind humming along, Nina."

"And you keep me passing my tests with flying colors. Cara? You should see how Mrs. Delahunty works with me to get ready for exams. She is a stern taskmaster. I'm going to ace that organic chem test. I know I will."

"You better." Mrs. Delahunty wagged a finger at the young woman.

To me, the older woman added, “Nina keeps me young. Honestly she does. She’s gotten me caught up on all the slang terms. Introduces me to TV programs I would never ordinarily watch. Helps me put on my face each morning. Takes Mally for long walks. Reads to me from her textbooks. Nina is my familiar, like witches have. She goes out into the world and reports what she experiences to me. I truly think she’s all that’s keeping me alive.”

My immediate urge was to disagree with Mrs. Delahunty. None of us like to think about death and dying. Even the passing of a relative stranger can cause us to feel uneasy. My impulse was to pretend that Mrs. Delahunty was healthy and that she would live many decades longer, but I knew better. Shortly before my father’s mother died, she’d made a similar remark. Of course, I’d pooh-poohed it at the time because I was young and couldn’t imagine death. Since then, I’ve come to respect that older people can tell when their days are coming to an end.

Nina’s face clouded. “Mrs. Delahunty! That’s not true. Don’t say such things! You’re going to live for decades more. I know it!”

“Piddle, child, piddle. I’ve lived a good life. A long life. I’ve had two husbands. Traveled the world. Indulged almost every desire. There comes the time for every actor to bow and walk off stage. Mine is near.” Mrs. Delahunty must have once been a smoker, because she has that gruff whiskey-and-tobacco timbre to her voice. If I closed my eyes, I could pretend I was in a bar, listening to a jazz singer.

Nina got a panicky look on her face. “Mrs. Delahunty, don’t talk like that! You’re fine, just fine. I bet you’ll outlive me by fifty years or more.”

“That’s highly doubtful,” Mrs. Delahunty said. “Another fifty years? Nina, dearest, you are too smart for that. I’m not going to be blowing out 130 candles on a cake, dear heart. We both know I won’t live forever.”

This was my chance to step in and guide the conversation. “Mrs. Delahunty? I have to admit that living to 130 is unlikely, but Nina makes a good point. You’re a lovely lady, and I hope you grace us with your presence for many, many years to come.” I gave the woman’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Is there anything I can bring to your party? Any food item?”

“Just bring yourself.” Mrs. Delahunty’s eyes twinkled. “We’re going to have a wonderful time!”

As Mrs. Delahunty and Nina left, I was joined by Honora McAfee, my resident miniaturist. Honora is the oldest of my three salespeople. A spry seventy-six, she’s lived in the area most of her life and knows everybody. Smoothing the front of her pink-and-white striped seersucker dress, she watched as Mrs. Delahunty and Nina made their way slowly down the street. “That’s a sight that does my heart good.”

“Really?” I could tell by the tone of her voice that Honora meant more than what she’d said. She’s like that. Although she’s not a gossip, she can share the most fascinating tidbits of information about our neighbors. “Any particular reason?”

“Brooke Delahunty is a dear, sweet person. A woman with a good heart. Although you can’t tell it by looking at her or listening to her, she came from a hardscrabble background. I believe

she moved here from Detroit. When I first met her, she butchered the King's English something terrible."

"You're kidding!" I couldn't imagine the oh-so-proper Mrs. Delahunty using bad grammar.

Honora tilted her head and looked me directly in the eyes. "Cara, darling, you have to remember that even the humble lizard uses camouflage to save his skin. The little anole can change his color when necessary. Brooke did what she needed to fit in. Over time, she realized her English was substandard. After listening to other people who were better educated, she corrected herself. Today, you would have no idea that she'd spoken so poorly. To put it simply, Brooke set her sights on being a respectable woman of means. That meant changing her colors and starting over."

I believe Honora would have said more, but a chattering group of tourists pushed through my front door. The results of my waiting on them would determine whether I'd finish the week in the black or in the red. With a nod in the direction of our guests, Honora left me to my job.

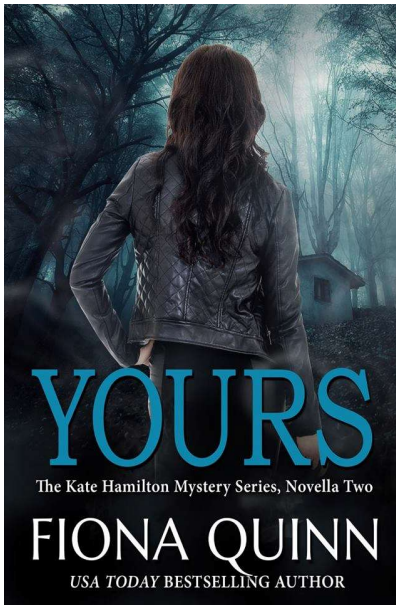
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Fiona Quinn

YOURS

Science teacher Kate Hamilton is hiding out in the small Virginia town where she was born and raised. Her marriage is in tatters. Her future uncertain. Kate begins the new semester at Boonestown High teaching their new STEM CSI classes. An object collected as “evidence” during a class project serves as a distraction for Kate. It's an expensive accessory for a town where their only manufacturing plant has been shuttered. Good deeds can be deadly. Join Kate as she tries to stay one step ahead of the killer.

CHAPTER ONE

Sunday

Kate Hamilton's gaze scanned the objects she'd laid on her bed—a pile of spent brass Tim had gathered for her at the police shooting range, a Moon Pie wrapper, an old knitted hat, and a yellow rubber ducky.

Aunt Emma walked into Kate's bedroom with bathroom cleaner in one hand and a box of tissues in the other. "I'm just putting these under your counter," she said, glancing at Kate's collection as she moved through the room.

Kate added an orange magic marker, and a pink candle stick to the objects she'd placed on the towel she was using to protect the quilt underneath.

The quilt had been handcrafted back in the nineteen-forties by Granny Jones. Granny Jones crafted dozens of handstitched quilts. She said she had to have something to keep her mind and fingers busy as she worried about her new husband and her four older brothers who were all over in France, fighting the Nazis.

Aunt Emma hadn't liked to sew as much as her mother had. When it was Aunt Emma's time to fret about her new husband off at war, she kept herself busy by crocheting shawls for the folks up in the nursing home.

While Granny Jones's family came home just fine, Aunt Emma's husband had been disabled in the war. His challenges were what the doctors at the VA labelled Post-Vietnam Syndrome while the elders in Scarborough called it shell-shock or battle fatigue.

War disabilities of one kind or another ran in Kate's family. That's what happened when you had a family tradition of taking the oath and marching off into the sunset.

Yes, Kate mused, women keeping the hearth fires burning was a tradition for her ancestors in every war since 1812.

Kate was just another generation to weather the storms of military family life and its aftermath.

She drew her finger along the circle of the wedding ring pattern on the quilt done up in bright summer colors against a snow-white background. Then she touched her own wedding ring—well Ryan's wedding ring—that she wore on her index finger. He'd been off on a top-secret mission in the Middle East and had come home with both a brain injury and a desire to keep her safe by kicking her out of their house in Boston.

Ryan's explosive and sometimes violent outbursts needed space. Space that didn't endanger Kate.

He loved her, so she had to go.

Of course, Ryan had packed a bag and wanted to do the leaving, but that was more than Kate could handle. “I’ll go,” she’d said in a panic. “I’ll just head down to Virginia and stay with my aunt for a little while.”

That was how Kate ended up here, staying with Aunt Emma in rural Virginia, sleeping under Granny Jones’s wedding ring quilt.

Sleep had indeed come a little easier for her since Aunt Emma put the quilt on her bed, now that it was the beginning of September, and nights could feel brisk up here in the mountains.

She hadn’t expected to be here this long.

She’d packed up and left Boston after her grades were submitted last June, planning to head back up to her teaching job as soon as her CSI internship under Detective Tim Gibbon’s supervision was complete.

In her experience, life didn’t follow along planned trajectories.

It would be best if she could just learn to go with the flow, but that wasn’t really her nature.

Though she’d grown up here in Scarborough, Kate had left right after high school with the firm intention of never spending a significant chunk of time here again. She was a city girl through and through.

But Ryan had asked her to stay away.

For his health’s sake, she’d let her job as a biology teacher in Boston go and had accepted a position made possible with a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) grant to teach CSI sciences at the high school in the neighboring town. Boonestown was just a thirty-minute drive over the mountain. It was a one semester gig.

Yup, six months was about as long as Kate thought she could stomach being away. She missed the bustle of Boston, the life she’d made there, her friends, and mostly she missed Ryan.

Her eye caught on her tennis shoes in the corner, and Kate added one of them to the pile on the bed and put a lime green weight next to it.

She glanced up from her project when Aunt Emma emerged from the bathroom, holding Kate’s prenatal vitamin bottle.

“I didn’t mean to snoop. But this caught my eye.” She set the half-full bottle on the nightstand then smoothed the back of her skirt as she sat down on the bed, sending Kate a sympathetic glance.

Kate shifted to sit on the other end of her bed. She’d been avoiding this talk.

“Oh, honey, when did you find out?” Aunt Emma reached for Kate’s hand, clasping it tightly. There was a lot of emotion running down her aunt’s arm, through her fingers, and into Kate—trepidation, concern. A lot of hope. But no joy.

Kate knew what the trepidation was about. She knew that this was going to be a big problem with her being here and pregnant. Everyone—possibly even Aunt Emma—would be thinking this was Tim’s baby. Kate and Tim loved each other, after all. They had been high school sweethearts, and everyone had anticipated their wedding—especially Tim—until Kate hauled herself off to Boston.

That's where she met and married Ryan.

And Tim had married Pam. They had two little boys.

Tim and Kate were friends.

Just friends.

No benefits.

Well, there was a lot of benefit to being friends with Tim. No romantic benefits.

They loved each other in a sentimental kind of way. But Pam, and most everyone else in the town of Scarborough, thought that since Kate's husband's brain got scrambled on a mission, that Kate was back in town for the sole purpose of winning Tim back into her life.

This pregnancy was going to make waves. Waves in a small town quickly took on the height and destructive power of a tsunami. And the grip that Aunt Emma had on her hands proved her aunt anticipated just that.

"It's not Tim's baby."

"I didn't ask that now did I?" Aunt Emma tipped her head. "I asked how long you've known."

"I did the test the morning I left Boston back in June. The doctor says I'm just now fourteen weeks along."

"Ryan knows?"

"I was waiting."

"How long did that wait look to you?" she asked.

"When I came here for the internship, my plan was to give Ryan the space he needed to get himself stabilized, then I'd go home. I thought I'd tell him then." She took in a deep breath and sighed it out. "When he insisted that I not come home, I thought, well, I'll get through my first trimester. If I were to miscarry, I didn't want to..." She let her gaze stray to the wall with its antique wallpaper in pristine condition. It was hard to look at Aunt Emma right now. Kate felt too vulnerable, so she left her gaze resting there on a nosegay of flowers. "It's just been easier not to have anyone judge me."

Aunt Emma patted Kate's hand with understanding. "So now you're on to the beginnings of your second trimester, don't you think you should let Ryan know?"

Kate pursed her lips and nodded. "I'd better also have a chat with Tim. The gossip mills will be working overtime when I really start to show."

"See?" Aunt Emma laughed. "Right now, everyone's saying that you're getting chubby since you've been here because I feed you too much berry cobbler and ice cream for dinner. And I was feeling a might guilty." She turned her head to look at the bed. "What are you getting up to with this stuff?"

"A project for school. These are things I'm going to put along a clue trail to see what my students believe they know about crime scene investigation. They might be more advanced than I think, and I can move them on to harder things, or I may need to go in and un-brainwash them from the television shows they watch. I'm curious to see just what I'm going to find when we go out into the woods."

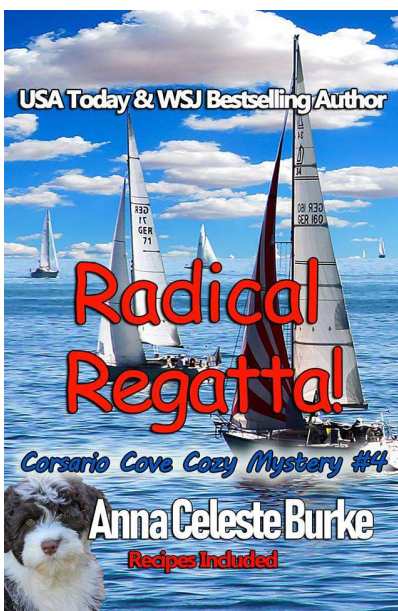
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Anna Celeste Burke

Radical Regatta!

Rescuing a dog that's swimming for its life in Corsario Cove, draws Kim and Brien into troubled waters as a Fourth of July Regatta turns deadly. It won't be smooth sailing for anyone until these twenty-something sleuths solve the mystery behind the murder and mayhem.

CHAPTER ONE

It's a Miracle!

When the sun rose, we were already on the beach. Not surfing, yet, but meditating if you can believe it. My inner child is a cynical street kid and highly skeptical about anything otherworldly. I'm suspicious about plenty that goes on in the world around me, too. Nevertheless, here I was with my hunky, surfer dude husband, Brien, sitting silently in the sand with Bede Greco.

Father Bede Greco, a Jesuit priest with a unique skill set, sat on my left as still as a statue. Seated on my right, Brien was motionless, too. I knew that because I'd opened my eyes and glanced at both men. When I'd sneaked a peek once before, Brien was doing the same. Our eyes had met, and we'd stifled a giggle before looking away. Did Brien's stillness now mean that he'd settled into a meditative state sometimes called quietus?

I got my answer. It came in the form of a loud snort. Not quietus. A deeper state of meditation at which Brien excels, otherwise known as sleep. Bede seemed not to notice as Brien shook himself awake and gazed at the surface of the Pacific Ocean cast in the golden glow of sunrise. Suddenly, he went on alert, staring intently at the horizon.

I tried to see what had caught his eye, but without success. The man I married a few months ago has eagle-eyes—better than twenty-twenty vision. I wasn't sure what to do until an alarm went off. Bede had set it for thirty minutes to alert us that our meditation session was over.

In a flash, Brien was up on his feet. Dressed in a wetsuit, he didn't stop to put on his booties but ran in his bare feet for the water. Along the way, Brien grabbed his longboard and plunged into the surf. His muscular arms bulged as he propelled himself through the water.

"He's in a hurry to catch that first wave, isn't he? It must have been an inspired meditation."

"Or a darn good dream," I muttered in reply to Bede's comment. In no time flat, Brien had pushed beyond the point at which the waves begin to swell. That's where we surfers usually sit and wait in what we call a "line-up," trying to determine the right moment to take off and ride a wave. With more skill than I possess, a ride like that can carry you all the way to shore.

When Brien kept going, plunging through the water as hard and fast as I'd ever seen him move, I finally spotted something. "What is that?" I asked, pointing in the direction in which Brien was heading, driven as if some devil of the deep was on his heels.

"I'm not sure," Bede responded. "Something's moving out there. It's in the open water just beyond the point where the boats anchor before making their way into the marina."

"Maybe someone fell off a boat," I speculated.

“I don’t see a boat anywhere, do you?”

“No,” I replied anxiously watching Brien as he kept going. I ran into the water, as far as I could go before the waves lifted my feet from the ground. Then I gasped and shouted to Bede. “It’s a dog! There’s a dog in the water, swimming for its life!”

Bede had already grabbed his surfboard and took off, paddling after Brien. He was never going to catch up with Brien. I wasn’t even going to try. Instead, I made my way back onto the beach, ran to the spot where my board stood planted upright in the sand. I dug up the bag we’d buried nearby, aiming to hide our valuables during the surfing we planned to do after meditating. The bag contained our cellphones. I grabbed my phone and called resort security.

“Big Al,” I hollered into the phone. “It’s Kim.” I must have caught Big Al in a moment deep meditation. He sounded groggy.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re on the beach, Big Al, and we’ve got an emergency.”

“Gidget, is that you?”

“Yes. Brien and Bede have gone into the water. Brien’s way, way out at the edge of the cove. He’s trying to rescue a dog swimming for shore from the ocean. Bede’s trying to catch up so he can help.”

“A dog? Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I replied. As I caught sight of the dog that was closer now, I spoke again. “I’m sure. Can you get medical help down here at the beach in case we need it?”

“For the dog?”

“I hope the dog’s the only one who’s going to need it.” I took another look. My he-man, built like Chris Hemsworth in that Thor movie, was barely recognizable as he sliced through the glittering water. The dog was paddling toward him but moving more slowly now.

“Got it. I’ll call the lifeguards on the boardwalk. Someone should already be there this morning. If not, I’ll go to their office and grab the rescue equipment myself.”

“Thanks,” I said as I hung up and then picked up a backpack that contained our wallets, keys, towels, water, and protein bars. Feeling useless, I pulled a couple of big towels from the bag and put the phones back into watertight pouches before returning them to the backpack. I walked to the water’s edge and waited. Then my heart skipped a beat. The dog disappeared under the water.

Brien rolled off his board and plunged into the water. After a few anxious moments, a bolt of joy hit me. Brien hopped back up onto his board. When he turned around, pointing his surfboard back toward the beach, I could see a dark splotch on his surfboard. It didn’t look much like a dog at this point. Bede was making his way toward them.

Not bad for an old guy, I thought as Bede passed the halfway point between Brien and the shore. I’d never say that aloud to him. Partly because Bede’s not that old, and in my twenties, I have no reason to be smug. I’m in no shape to keep up with him.

Since marrying Brien, I’d turned over a new leaf and had started working out. Initially an act of marital devotion, I now look forward to improving my physical condition. To be honest, some

of that's about not thoroughly embarrassing myself. In addition to coaxing me into the gym, Moondoggie has taught me to surf.

As Brien got closer to the shore, I could see a large, furry dog lying motionless in front of Brien. I paced back and forth as Bede and Brien closed the distance between them. I was straining to see if the dog moved as Bede joined them, but Bede's body blocked my view.

Suddenly, there was plenty of motion around me. The lifeguards had arrived, running from the direction of the shops on the boardwalk a few steps from the beach. Behind me, more commotion sprang up as Big Al came to a noisy stop in his golf cart that also carried a couple of the Security Associates who, like Brien, work for him. I quickly explained to the circle of men surrounding me what had happened. Bede and Brien were steadily making their way toward shore. One of the lifeguards, Paul Abbott, dropped equipment into a small dinghy.

"Paul, can I go with you?" I asked, still clutching the backpack and towels.

"Sure," he said. I stepped into the dinghy that he and a fellow lifeguard launched. I didn't recognize the other lifeguard, but I'm sure the resort had hired extra help with the Fourth of July Regatta scheduled to take place in a couple of days. When Paul started the small motor, we sped toward Brien and Bede, bouncing through the waves and reaching them quickly.

"Want a tow?" the lifeguard shouted as we drew close to Brien.

"Can you check this guy, first?" He asked. The wet, furry pooch on the front end of Brien's board didn't move or make a sound. Bede slid off his surfboard into the water which rose and fell with the gentle swells near the line-up.

"The dog hasn't drowned, has it?" I asked dreading the answer as Bede ran his hands over the wet dog doing a quick exam. Then he leaned in to look closely at a collar around the dog's neck. Bede looked at me and shook his head no.

"The poor boy must be cold and exhausted, but he's breathing. He doesn't seem to be injured or in pain." Then Bede, Brien, and one of the lifeguards in the dinghy carefully transferred the dog. Once he was in the dinghy, I wrapped him in beach towels and began to rub him gently, trying to dry him off. "There's no name or tag on the collar," Bede added as I spotted it.

"His build is a lot like the standard poodle our friend adopted. Is he a poodle?" I asked, not sure to whom I was even speaking.

"I don't think so," Brien responded, resting his head on his board.

"Here, eat this!" I commanded as I dug out a protein bar and handed him one.

"A Portuguese Water Dog," Bede said in response to my previous question. He hoisted himself back onto his board. Without asking, I handed Bede a protein bar, too. A lifeguard in the dinghy with me was examining the dog now. He just shook his head when the dog barely moved.

Is he dying? I wondered as I went back to drying the dog with towels. I rubbed him more briskly and spoke to him, hoping Bede was right that he was just exhausted.

"How are you doing, you good boy?" I gasped with happiness when he whined, opened his eyes for a second, and licked my hand.

“What a good dog,” I said as I leaned in and rubbed his ears. He nuzzled my hand with his cold, wet nose. I poured a little water into the palm of my hand, and he lapped it up.

“Fortunately, Portuguese Water Dogs are excellent swimmers,” Bede commented as we reoriented the dinghy toward the beach. The lifeguard nodded in agreement.

“Big Al called Betsy Wilcox, the vet who’s on call to handle problems with guests’ pets at the resort. She’s on her way. Let’s get the dog back to shore so the vet can check him out. My guess is Betsy’s going to want to take him to the San Albinus Animal Hospital to give him a complete work up. He must be a strong guy to be alive.”

“He’s lucky, too, that Brien spotted him during his morning meditation while his eyes were downcast,” Bede said smirking.

“It’s a miracle,” I said, smiling. I wasn’t being totally snarky, either, as I told my inner street kid to give it a rest.

“Grab this, Brien. You’ve worked enough miracles for one day.” Brien clasped the towline the lifeguard offered him in one hand and held onto his board with the other. Bede took off paddling to catch a wave back to the beach.

“Have you guys heard anything about a rescue operation by the Coast Guard?” I asked Paul as we made the short trip back to shore.

“Not a word. Big Al asked me that question when he called. I told him we hadn’t received any alerts or calls for assistance. No reports of boats in trouble, lost cargo, passengers, or missing dogs. Maybe the dog has a microchip, and the vet can trace his owners.” As he said that, Dr. Betsy Wilcox arrived. I’d seen her in the lobby of the resort, but this was the first time I’d heard her name. Once we got to shore, we all climbed out and pulled the dinghy onto the beach. She slipped into it to examine the dog. In minutes, she sighed with relief.

“He appears to be in surprisingly good shape. I’ll know that for certain once I get him to the hospital. Thank goodness you rescued him. It would have been an awful shame to lose such a hardy fellow with so much determination to get to shore.”

“Brien wouldn’t have let that happen. I hope you can find his owners. He needs his family,” I said as Betsy, and the lifeguards lifted the dog from the dinghy to a stretcher.

“I’ll do my best to locate them if he’s got a chip.”

“I understand, Dr. Wilcox.”

“It’s Betsy, please,” she said and stuck out her hand. I shook it and gave her my name. “Call me later, and I’ll give you an update. You can reassure me that Brien’s well, too.”

“Will do.” I smiled at Brien, who stood nearby, eating another protein bar and guzzling water. Then I knelt next to the dog and ruffled his wet fur.

“Don’t worry about a thing, okay, boy? We’ll find your family and get to the bottom of the mystery about how on earth you ended up out in the middle of nowhere all alone.” The sweet pooch flopped his tail up and down.

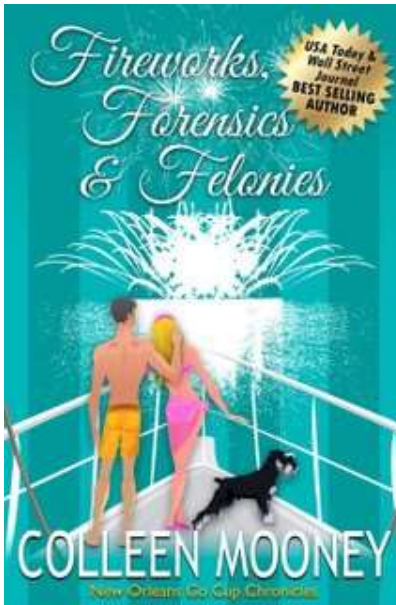
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Colleen Mooney

Fireworks, Forensics, and Felonies

When Brandy and Jiff get invited to a Fourth of July barbecue they don't bargain for the host and hostess to get blown up seconds apart but miles away from each other. What does a Schnauzer, a baby squirrel, a motorcycle gang member, a homeless man and a million-dollar life insurance policy have in common? Add in EPA labs, fraud and strange relatives and it is Brandy's job to see the connection before one of Jiff's friends is wrongly accused of murder. Fireworks on the Fourth of July are not the only sparks flying between Brandy and Jiff.

CHAPTER ONE

The smell of gunpowder is an aphrodisiac to me. That's why I've always loved fireworks. I love setting them off, not just watching. I love the smell that lingers in the air. My dad taught me how to light a cherry bomb when I was three years old. He struck a match, handed it to me and while he held the cherry bomb, he said, "C'mon, you light it and I'll throw it. It's gonna be loud."

What I remember most was the smell that hung in the air after the boom. From that first blast that went off fifteen feet from the porch we were standing on, I've been crazy for fireworks ever since. Every year after that I helped my dad set up and light the fireworks. Sometimes, Dante from next door helped us light them. I never missed a firework display on the Fourth of July or New Year's Eve, especially if I could be involved lighting them.

My name is Brandy Alexander and I grew up next door to five boys. I learned early on not to let them know I was afraid of something or those boys would have tortured me to death with it. Fireworks were different. I wasn't afraid of them, I loved them.

When I told Jiff this fact he arranged to take his sailboat out on Lake Pontchartrain for the Fourth of July fireworks display and be downwind so we'd catch the aromatic aftermath. The thought of smelling an entire barge of explosives was something I was not going to say no to.

I've been dating Jiff Heinkel for the last year. We met at a Mardi Gras parade where he kissed me in exchange for a paper flower. Then he asked me to meet him at the end of the parade and it was all over except the shouting. Shouting, in the form of tears, lots of tears...loud, sobbing tears, really from Dante's mom. Dante is one of the five boys who lived next door. Both sets of parents expected us to marry one day. Miss Ruth wanted us to marry because she loved me to death and wanted to see her son happy. My mother because she wanted me out of the house, the sooner, the better. Problem: Dante was not on the same page as our parents.

Now, Dante is with the New Orleans Police Department, Captain of the Homicide Division. It might have been the gunpowder from his weapons we used at the shooting range that kept me interested in him since he never did anything to indicate he wanted to move our future forward...together...until I met Jiff. Since then, he's been proclaiming his undying love. Dante's even gone so far as to welcome my help in his "ongoing investigations", something he was all too quick to run me off from in the past.

"Can I get you another glass of champagne?" Jiff asked. We were anchored out in Lake Pontchartrain on Jiff's sailboat listening to the waves gently kissing the side of the boat. It was the perfect night with a good breeze that made the sail here very enjoyable. Jiff's sailboat had a generator, air conditioning, and a queen size bunk in the stateroom. It was a very comfortable

yacht. Tonight, we could leave the hatches open and fall asleep to the sound of waves slapping at the hull, gently rocking us into a peaceful slumber.

“Yes, please,” I said handing him my glass. “I hope we’re in a good spot to get a whiff once the fireworks start.” I stuck my nose up pretending I was sniffing the air to pick up the gunpowder smell like my Meaux does when I’m cooking in the kitchen. Meaux liked fireworks too. He was the only dog I ever had that didn’t run and hide when they were exploding. Of course, Meaux just wanted to be wherever I was, regardless if he was afraid of loud noise or not.

“You’ll smell it once it starts. I made sure we’re downwind from the barge.” He looked around over the water accessing our position. “The wind is starting to pick up. If it blows much stronger, I don’t know if Ian can still fire them,” he said kissing my forehead. “I would never lure you out here under the pretense of seeing fireworks or smelling gunpowder and then not deliver. You would never speak to me again. I hoping the giant show you are going to smell will put you in a very grateful mood.”

“I’m already in a very grateful mood,” I said putting my arms around him. “How do you know the guy who’s putting on this extravaganza?”

“Ian and I went to Jesuit together. We worked on a science project in our senior year that involved blowing stuff up. He’s a smart dude,” Jiff answered. “Now, he works for the EPA. He’s made a name for himself in the industry. Before you ask, fireworks have always been his thing. The City of New Orleans contracted him to set up this display in conjunction with the fireworks going off in Kenner, Slidell and downtown on the Mississippi River.”

“Ian works for the EPA, then explodes stuff into the air,” I said. “Sounds like a dichotomy.”

“Well, life is full of contradictions, isn’t it?” Jiff said. “He also said he had something he wanted to run by me. He alluded to a discovery and wants my opinion on how to proceed. I thought we’d sail back to the harbor and go over to Ian’s house in the morning and give them a hand getting ready for their barbeque. Their home is close to the marina. His wife’s name is Sophie. You’ll love her.”

“Do you know what he wants to talk to you about?” I asked.

“No, but he sounded bothered by something and our schedules didn’t allow us to meet until after the fourth. He invited us to his house tomorrow for his Fourth of July barbeque because he wants to meet you. They have a three-story, white stucco house—Miami Vice style—on Lakeshore Drive, just the other side of the levee, over there,” he said and pointed to a large home we could only see the top floor and roof of sitting behind the grassy flood protection.

We planned for us to spend the night on the boat. I had asked Suzanne, my roommate to dog sit Meaux and Isabella, Jiff’s schnauzer. He prepared a dinner of steaks and vegetables which he cooked on the grill attached to a stern guard railing. After dinner, we sat in the cockpit while we waited for the fireworks to start.

“The wind is picking up,” Jiff said. “This is a great night for sailing, but I hope this breeze doesn’t give Ian problems with lighting his display.”

We had dropped the anchor just off the seawall near the New Orleans Lakefront airport. This way, we’d have a short sail back to the harbor, dock, and make the short drive to Ian and

Sophie's home in the morning. Jiff advised he had planned a late breakfast for us to allow Ian and Sophie time to recover from tonight and get ready for their barbeque. I was looking forward to a relaxing weekend with my guy and meeting his friends.

The night was clear, not a cloud in the sky. There was a good chance we would see the other display set to go off across town on the Mississippi River next to the French Quarter and maybe the one in Kenner. They were all scheduled to start at 9:00 pm. The fireworks near the French Quarter started. We could see them and heard the soft pops and cracks in the distance. We moved to sit on the bow of the boat looking up in awe of the cracking, fiery display over our heads. Multiple bursts popped and lit up the sky. Ian's barge was scheduled to go off at the same time, but he was late. Once both displays were going, we'd be under a twinkling, dancing blanket of light.

"Wow! Ian outdid himself on the fireworks," Jiff said looking up after a particularly thunderous explosion in the direction across town.

"Yes, that last one was really loud," I said. "I felt the vibration all the way over here."

"Ian's company is Up in Smoke Fireworks. Wait until the end. He likes a grand finale," Jiff said and kissed my hand he was holding.

"I don't think that's part of the big ending," I said nodding toward a blaze on the other side of the levee, along Lakeshore Drive. "That last boom sounded like it came from there."

As we watched the smoke billowing under the lights cast by the fireworks display, Jiff stood up never taking his eyes off the burning house and said, "That's Ian's house."

I jumped up with him. We stood watching the flames lick higher into the night sky. The smoke just got thicker and thicker. It started to drift over the sea wall across the water making it hard to see Ian's barge in the distance. We watched as the wind started to pick up and feed the fire. It gained strength sending flames soaring into the night sky. Billowing black smoke shrouded the house creating intermittent views of the blaze. We stood staring at the fire.

Then, a giant second boom came. It was Ian's barge exploding.

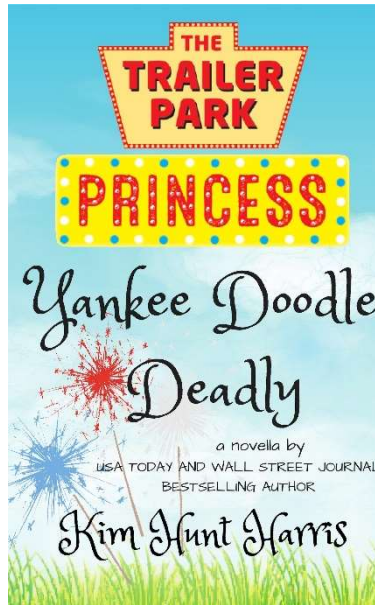
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Kim Hunt Harris

The Trailer Park Princess Is Yankee Doodle Deadly

Salem Grimes and her octogenarian sidekick Viv are celebrating Independence Day in true American style—with a golf cart parade, ice cream social, pet dress-up contest, and a to-the-mat round of Name That Tune at Viv’s swanky retirement home, Belle Court. But the fireworks get an early start when the nephew of one of Belle Court’s wealthiest residents is found murdered out behind the brisket and potato salad table, and Viv’s favorite physical therapist, Hot Ronaldo, is the main suspect. Salem and Viv put their own festivities on hold to once again track down a killer and declare Hot Ronaldo's independence from a prison sentence.

CHAPTER ONE

“You decent?” I stood at the door to Viv’s swanky apartment at Belle Court Senior Living Center, my dog Stump tucked under my arm, and called through the crack. This was a necessary part of my visit to Viv’s place, as I had learned early on in our friendship. Viv isn’t bothered by pesky restrictions like modesty. And look, my caution has nothing to do with her age; I don’t want to see any of my friends swanning around their living rooms wearing nothing but a thong and support hose. Like, ever.

Viv answered something I couldn’t quite make out, but whatever it was, she called it from the general vicinity of her bedroom. I figured it was safe enough to enter, so I stepped into her living room and closed the door.

“Everybody’s freaking out downstairs,” I announced, setting Stump down to run around and sniff Viv’s immaculate white carpet, wicker plant baskets and general sterile conditions. It was like another planet from Stump’s and my trailer in Trailertopia.

Viv said something else, still from the other room, and I couldn’t make that out, either. But something in her tone got my “uh-oh” sensors activated. Viv sounded annoyed.

This was an unexpected turn of events, since I’d spent the last several days with Viv at Belle Court, preparing for this day she was so excited about. It was July 4, and Belle Court was pulling out all the stops. Olivia, the new Activities Director, had planned the event for weeks and her enthusiasm had all the residents pumped. There would be fireworks tonight, of course, but events were going on all day long: a golf tournament at the home’s small course, an ice cream social, Americana movie marathon in the theater, a marching brass band, a pet parade, all kicked off by a golf cart parade this morning.

She only had to say one thing to get Viv all in, though: competition. The best decorated golf cart in the parade would win a trophy and have their picture up in the Fireside Lounge until someone thought to take it down.

She stalked into the living room wearing form-fitting silver green spandex from head to toe. The shiny fabric hugged her long bird legs and little round tummy. She clutched a starburst Statue of Liberty headband in one hand.

“Hey there, Lady Liberty,” I said, a little dismayed at the thin set of her lips. “Somebody declare war on your birthday or something?”

There was a tap at the door, and I opened it. Olivia stood there with a harried smile.

“Oh, hi, Salem. Is she in?”

“Hi, Olivia!” Viv sang. She came up behind me, all rosy and light now. “Everything going okay downstairs, hon?”

“Yes, yes, just all the last-minute craziness, of course. The Greers are unhappy with the time for their ice cream social because it’s during their normal nap time. And Bob and Charlie are still...working out some minor kinks in the movie lineup.” She gave a nervous laugh. “Bob had it all worked out chronologically but Charlie is concerned that showing Shenandoah, which is Civil War era, in color and then showing Mr. Smith Goes to Washington in black and white afterward will confuse people.”

“Not to mention Jimmy Stewart’s miraculous age regression,” I said.

“Old coots,” Viv said with a flap of her hand. “Don’t worry about them. They’ll work it out or else they’ll wear themselves out and go take a nap, and someone with some sense can take over.” She threw her head back and laughed.

“Yes, well, I hope you’re right.” She wrinkled her brow. “I just wanted to check on you and make sure you’re okay?”

“Me? Pffft. I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, it’s just that you seemed so upset last night—”

“That? That was nothing.”

Olivia blinked, and I wondered just what I had missed last night.

“Are you sure? I’m so sorry about the miscommunication.” She turned to me and grimaced. “I thought we’d made it clear that the wagons pulled by the golf carts were for decorations only, and that everyone riding had to be inside the golf carts. But it seems not everyone understood that. I’m sure that’s my fault.”

Aha. Now Olivia’s visit made sense. Olivia had given permissions for the golf cart parade entrants to pull wagons if they wanted an extra platform for their decorations. Viv had gone all in on that. Her wagon was covered with a detailed replica of the Statue of Liberty’s base, and she’d paid a guy in town to make a stand for her and bolt it to the bottom of the cart. It reminded me of the stand for the china dolls my G-Ma collected, with a pole up the back and waist-high brace that Viv would lean against and belt herself to. Under the robe, it wouldn’t show at all. I’d gone with Viv to pick it up. Standing in the guy’s garage, it seemed stable enough. But, of course, she wasn’t going to be standing in the guy’s garage. She was going to be pulled around the winding Belle Court roads, complete with speed bumps, by a possibly lurching golf cart. “Possibly lurching” because I was driving the thing, and my experience driving golf carts was limited to one drunken night with a pro shop employee whose name I couldn’t remember, back in my drinking days.

I had questioned the safety of the plan early on, but had given up in the face of Viv’s determination. I’d known Viv long enough to know I certainly wasn’t going to stop her doing what she wanted to do. I just began praying for no falls and, if there were falls, no broken hips and, if there were broken hips, at least no liability for me. Not that I didn’t have faith in God’s protection, but I had to admit I liked the idea of a total ban on Viv’s presence in the wagon even better.

Viv stepped close and took Olivia’s hand between hers. “Sweetie, don’t you worry about it. It’s fine. It’s going to be great.”

“I really do think you still have a very good chance of winning the competition. Your float is so detailed! And that costume is...” She gestured to Viv’s shiny verdigris.

“It’ll be much better with the robe, of course,” Viv said. “And the torch.”

“Of course. The judges are going to love it.”

Viv waved her hand again. “Oh, I don’t care about that silly contest. I’m all about the fun. The spirit of the day, you know. Celebrating our great nation’s independence.”

I don’t care about that silly contest. Yep, something was definitely up.

Olivia smiled, looking enormously relieved. “Exactly. I think it’s going to be a wonderful.”

“Absolutely,” I said, because I was feeling kind of left out of the conversation, and because poor Olivia had been stressing herself out for the past month over this day. She needed all the reassurance she could get.

She breathed a deep, satisfied breath and squared her shoulders. “Okay, then.” She noticed Stump and bent to scratch her ears. “Are you all set, Stump? You’re going to march in the pet parade, aren’t you?”

“No, no,” I said, shifting my fat little doggo under my arm so I could cover her ears. Then I whispered, “Definitely.” Unlike Viv, I wasn’t going to pretend like I didn’t care about the pet parade and costume contest. I cared a lot. I made Stump a red, white and blue striped tutu and a headband with springy, twirly sparklers and stars shooting out of it. With her fat tummy and slight underbite, it was hands down the cutest thing I’d ever seen.

I had little hope we’d actually win anything. Oh, Stump was most definitely the clear winner in any cutest pet contest. But my sweet, snaggle-toothed, short-legged lump of a dog did not like wearing things. Nothing. No collar, no harness, no tutu and certainly no sparkly headband. If I had any hope of getting a cute picture of her in festive attire, I would have to be very strategic. Pretty much my strategy was, I would put some Jerky Treats on the table and then slip the stuff on, snap a picture before she had time to snorf it all down.

Olivia beamed, clearly relieved that the Viv fire had been put out. “Okay, then. I’m going to head downstairs and make sure the golf carts are being lined up properly.”

“Listen, sweetie, you just relax and enjoy the day. You’ve worked yourself to the bone over this and now it’s time to relax and enjoy it. Everything is going to be fine. It’s going to be beautiful, in fact. You’ve done an amazing job.” She leaned in and gave Olivia a hug.

Viv, passing out free hugs. Oh yeah. Something was definitely up.

I closed the door behind Olivia and watched as Viv put down her crown so she could slide the robe over her head. I had to admit, it was pretty impressive. The shimmery silver-green fabric swooped across to hang from a starburst pin at her shoulder, then fell in graceful folds at her feet. She faced the hall mirror with grim determination and settled the crown into her white hair.

“You’re going to stand in the wagon, aren’t you?” I said.

“Of course, I am.” she said, fluffing her hair around the crown. “Lady Liberty is not going to climb off her pedestal and ride in a golf cart.” She snorted at the very idea.

“What are you going to tell Olivia?” I suspected I knew the answer.

“Nothing. I’m going to hop up there at the last second. What is she going to do, pull me down?”

“You’re going to add to her stress,” I said. “Between you, Bob and Charlie, and the Greers, she’s going to end up with higher blood pressure than all of you combined.”

“She’ll be fine. The wagon is completely stable, and I’ll be the crowning glory of the parade. The crowd will go wild, and she’ll get credit for planning such a beautiful day. Whatever stress Olivia initially feels will dissolve completely when she sees how right I am.”

In the elevator ride downstairs, Viv took a few breaths and then went into full character mode. She tucked her book to her hip, lifted her torch, and put her chin in the air.

“Your arm’s going to get tired,” I said.

“Did you say that to the men who planted the flag at Iwo Jima, Salem? To the men who rowed Washington across the Delaware that dark, frigid Christmas morning?”

“I was going to, but I was hampered by the fact that I didn’t exist yet.”

“My point is, victory calls for sacrifice. And I am prepared to sacrifice.”

“For the victory of having your picture up in the Fireside Lounge?”

“Mmmhhmm.” She kept her chin high. “It’ll be up there until Veteran’s Day, barring any unforeseen balloon volleyball tournaments. That’s over four months.”

“I guess all I can say, then, is may your sacrifice not be in vain.”

“Besides, I’ve been working out,” Viv said, still looking at the ceiling. “I’m definitely the strongest one in my age group in that new functional fitness program Olivia started.”

“Woo, Viv,” I said as the elevator bumped softly to a stop. “Pretty soon you’re going to be flipping tractor tires and jumping on boxes like those Cross Fit people.”

The doors slid silently open and I moved to step out, but stopped when I saw thick navy blue and cream patterned carpet of the recently-remodeled third floor instead of the first-floor lobby as I’d expected.

“And I told you from the very first it would eventually come to this!” Evelyn Greer snapped at Howard Greer. They stood to the side of the elevator, unaware that we were there.

I gave Viv a look, but she was too busy being a beacon of freedom to bother with the likes of them.

“Hello?” I said, leaning out of the elevator. “Are you two waiting for the elevator?”

Mr. Greer turned at me, the scowl on his face vanishing in an instant. “Oh, I’m not...” He turned back to his wife as if awaiting her direction.

I placed my hand in the doorway to keep the sensors activated.

Mrs. Greer didn’t bother to hide her own frown. She took in Viv’s costume and said, “No, we were just heading back to our room. You can go.”

That confused me, because the elevator wouldn’t have stopped if someone hadn’t pushed the button. I looked at the otherwise deserted hallway, then over at Viv, who had somehow managed to take on a smug look even though she hadn’t changed positions.

“Come on down with us and join the golf cart parade,” Viv said cheerfully. “It’ll be fun.”

“We’d love to, but we can’t,” Evelyn Greer said, looking like she’d love to have a combination root canal and colonoscopy more than she’d love to come to that parade.

Viv lowered her arm and said, “Now, Evelyn, please don’t tell me you’re still holding your grudge against Olivia. She has worked so hard on this event and I know for a fact she would love to have you there.”

Mr. Greer forced a laugh. “There is no grudge against Olivia.”

“Of course, there’s not,” Mrs. Greer said. She gave Viv an up and down look that stopped just short of a sneer. “There has never been a grudge against Olivia. That was just a bunch of hateful, nosy old busybody talk. We may have had a difference of opinion with her months ago, but—” Again, she looked at Viv and rolled her eyes the tiniest bit. “We’re all adults. We’ve certainly moved on.”

Unperturbed by the insinuated insult, Viv smiled. “Well, I did see that you took up the archery classes last week. That was kind of you.”

This time Mrs. Greer let the full eyeroll go. “It has nothing to do with kindness. I was interested so I started the classes. I’m not very good at all.”

“Too bad you had to drop the functional fitness classes,” Viv said with a smile. “We miss you.”

“I’m sure you do. Come on, Howard.” She turned on her heel and left, Mr. Greer following after her.

I put my hand down and the doors slid closed. Viv lifted her chin, looking enormously pleased with herself.

“That was weird,” I said.

“You see, but you do not observe, Salem,” she said.

“You’ve been reading Sherlock again.”

“I don’t have to read again to remember Sherlock’s basic truths, Salem. Such as the fact that people don’t like to answer direct questions, but they do like to correct you.” She nodded. “Very instructive indeed.”

I thought back over the last few minutes, then shook my head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course, you don’t. But as soon as I tell you, it will all be so clear you’ll wonder how you could have missed it.”

The elevator came to another soft stop and the doors slide open, this time to the tiled lobby.

“Hit me with this truth bomb, then,” I said as I hitched Stump against my hip and we headed toward the doors, Viv’s robes billowing around her.

“She denied that she still held a grudge against Olivia, thereby confirming what I already knew. She quit the functional fitness classes and took up archery because she was intimidated by my performance in that class. The woman cannot beat me, so...” She smiled and shrugged. “She quit trying. Which is highly logical.”

I nodded as if this made a lick of sense, which it obviously did not. Still, it made Viv happy and I liked for Viv to be happy.

It was basically bedlam downstairs. The maintenance guys were lining up the golf carts, the marching band was warming up, and the Grand Ol' Grandkids section had overflowed its borders. There were little kids running everywhere with spinning pinwheels and little flags. Betsy Ross was trying to keep them rounded up, but the job was too big for one icon.

"Aren't you going to put Stump's tutu on—"

"Psht!" I hissed. I looked at Stump, wide-eyed. "There is no tutu."

The pet parade wasn't until this afternoon, so I certainly didn't want to let that cat out of the bag already.

"There's no tutu," I told her again. "You and I are going to drive the golf cart while Viv gets herself into big trouble." Stump gave a soft snort and turned away, stoically taking in the pandemonium.

Viv's costume was a hit. She was the only Statue of Liberty, although I did see some foam crowns among the people setting up lawn chairs around the parade route. As we made our way toward her cart, I heard several "oohs" and "aaahs."

Uncle Sam on stilts wobbled by, and Viv and I exchanged a worried look. Under his striped top hat and white beard, the guy looked to be about 14 or 15, and not an old hand at stilts. He weaved through the crowd of younger kids running around, and I was glad to have him far enough away so that if he fell, I wouldn't be expected to catch him.

"You sure you don't want to just walk behind? Lady Liberty comes off her throne, walks among the people, that kind of thing?"

"I will while we're lining up. But I'm climbing up there as soon as we get rolling."

We reached her cart and I had to admit, it looked pretty dumb with that pole sticking out of the base. Without her on it, it wasn't even clear what you were looking at. I saw several people looking quizzically at it.

As we got closer, I heard raised voices. Dismayed voices.

"Well, look at it! Somebody did something to it!" It was Coach, not exactly yelling but not exactly talking nice, either, to two of the Belle Court maintenance staff who were looking like they would dissolve into the ground if that were any way possible.

"Coach, now stop it." Coach's wife, Junebug, put her hand on his arm. She was as short and round as he was tall and lean. "They obviously don't know what's happened or they would have said so. They're not trying to pull one over on us."

Coach and Junebug were one of my favorite couples at Belle Court. They'd lived at Belle Court for about six months. Junebug was one of those people that everyone just loved. She'd taught third grade at the same school where Coach, well, coached, for thirty-five years. Everyone including Coach called her Junebug—or Miz Junebug, for the students—and everyone including her called him Coach. She was brisk and no-nonsense, but had a heart as big as Texas and seemed able to do anything, from bandaging scraped knees and teaching a group of 20 eight-year-olds to recite the entire Gettysburg Address, to becoming a second mother to Coach's football players.

Although they really were my favorites, for personal reasons, I avoided Coach and Junebug as much as possible. Junebug had been my teacher for a few months in third grade, but I hoped she'd forgotten all about me. I didn't want to remind her. That had not been a good time in my life, and I'd actually stolen something from her. I'd given it back, but in the process made a complete fool of myself. Even though it had been twenty years ago and I could see from my adult perspective that I had exhibited the classic behavior of a kid living in a highly dysfunctional atmosphere, I still burned with shame when I thought about it. Whenever I happened to pass by them, I always made myself very busy looking elsewhere.

Coach frowned at the two men but didn't say anything else. Instead, he put his hands on his hips and turned back to their wagon, where Junebug had worked for the past two weeks to recreate a very impressive Mount Rushmore out of chicken wire and papier-mache'. As soon as his back was turned, the two maintenance workers tripped over each other to get the heck out of there.

"It's not that bad," Junebug said, pushing at the crumpled brown mess. "I can get it back into shape."

"It looks more like Mount Squashmore now," he said.

"It's fine," Junebug said again. "It's fine, and it doesn't matter."

Coach folded his arms over his chest and I could see how this man inspired thirty-five years of champion six-man football teams. With that formidable look, even I would probably set a wind-sprint record.

"Oh no!" Viv said, circling Mount Squashmore slowly. "What happened?"

Junebug shook her head and continued to fuss with the chicken wire. "Nobody seems to know. They pulled it out of the garage like this." She checked her watch. "If we had more time, I could unhook it from the bottom and crawl up in there, get it pushed out from underneath."

As if on cue, Olivia hurried past, calling out to the golf cart drivers. "Everybody ready? Two minutes! We start rolling in two minutes!"

I hung back, sympathetic but also not wanting to draw attention to myself.

"But you worked so hard on this!" Viv said. "Salem, look at this!"

I nodded quickly and then turned as if something behind us suddenly demanded my attention.

"Oh, it's fine," Junebug said again. "It doesn't matter. Here, I'll just..." She took a little American flag and poked it through George Washington's lapel. "There. Now. It looks great." She stepped back and surveyed it. The shape remained vaguely familiar—people would be able to tell what it was, but might interpret it as Mouth Rushmore After an Asteroid Collides with the Earth. Junebug gave a brisk nod. "Coach, are you ready? Let's get started."

He gave her a quick side hug and then they climbed into their cart, her all smiles and him all stern business.

Viv moved back into character and walked imperiously behind the base on her wagon, holding her book and her torch, looking solemnly ahead. It was a good thing because I could see

movement up ahead. We were not the last golf cart but close to it—there were probably ten or twelve before us.

I climbed into the cart and set Stump on the seat beside me, keeping my focus on her so as not to draw attention from Junebug. I'd already decided that Viv was on her own when it came time for her to climb up on her base.

I was a little nervous that she'd be sitting on the open seat without a door, but let's be honest. Stump doesn't move for just any old reason, so I figured if I didn't drive too fast or take any curves too sharp so she slid off, she'd be okay. I just hoped the hotdog grilling hadn't started already, because that could be an enticement.

Olivia hurried back through, having reached the end of the carts and confirmed everyone was ready. "You all look fabulous! Thank you so much!"

She was just too cute, I thought. She wore a red and white horizontal striped skirt and a white t-shirt, with an American flag patterned scarf. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a bouncy ponytail with a sparkly red and blue band. She wore sandals and her toes were painted blue with white stars.

Next to her, I felt like a swamp creature. But, you know, whatever. At least I had my independence.

As soon as Olivia had disappeared into the crowd ahead, I felt the slight tug of the wagon moving under Viv's weight.

"Help me here, would you?" she said.

I ignored her.

Tug. Tug. I pretended to watch one of the grandkids run by and stole a side-eyed glance at Viv. She had her hand around the pole, one foot on the back of the wagon, and was attempting to pull herself up.

It wouldn't bother me any if she wasn't able to make it work.

"Here, Viv, let me help you there."

It was Howard Greer. Evelyn came up on the other side of Viv.

"Do you want me to give you a boost?"

"No, I don't need a boost," Viv snapped. "I'm perfectly capable of climbing up here under my own strength, of course. I just need someone to...here." She shoved the torch and book at him, then scrambled up the base like her life depended on it.

I couldn't maintain my pretense that I didn't know she'd climbed up there if I turned around and watched, so I faced front and listened.

"Okay," Viv said. "Let me just...get this belt wrapped around me."

"You've got the robe caught in the back," Evelyn said.

"I know that!" The cart shifted back and forth as Viv fought with the robe and the belt that was meant to hold her in place. "There," she finally said, sounding breathless but satisfied with herself. "Okay, hand me my stuff."

"Are you sure you're safe up there?" Evelyn said. "What if you fall and break a hip?"

"What if you mind your own business?"

I began to whistle She's a Grand Ol' Flag and watched the crowd.

The cart ahead of us started moving.

"Are you ready?" I called behind me. "It's time."

"Don't worry, Lady Liberty is good to go," Howard said, leaning in with one hand on the top of the cart. "We got her strapped in nice and tight."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but thanks." I took a deep breath and looked at Stump. "Okay, well...here we go."

I squeezed my eyes shut and eased my foot onto the accelerator.

I pictured the cart lurching forward, Viv jerking against the strap. The whole thing overbalancing and flopping over. All that happened, though, was we rolled silently forward a couple of inches. Even so, I was so nervous that I still took my feet off the pedal immediately.

Stump looked at me. I could feel Viv's impatience behind me. I took another deep breath and stepped on the pedal again.

We rolled silently along and after a minute or two, I began to adjust. The streets of Belle Court were smooth concrete pavement, and I realized that the parade organizers had devised a method of weaving from one side of the street to the other to avoid the speed bumps—one of my major fears. I was rounding my second speed bump behind Mount Squashmore when I noticed Uncle Sam, still wobbly on his stilts, lurching back through the crowd toward us.

Poor kid. He was really trying. He had a paper bag of candy he was trying to throw from, but he couldn't walk and throw at the same time. He would stop, grab a handful of candy, and toss it at the crowd. Each time, the motion threw him off his balance a bit and he pitched alarmingly back and forth before he steadied himself. I thought he was going to crash to the ground every time.

And the kids! Some of the grandkids were marching or riding on golf carts, but there were plenty left running around the edges. Those kids wanted their candy, and a couple of times one would make a move like they were going to dash from the crowd and make contact with Uncle Sam, which scared him at least as much as it did me. He kind of crouched on his stilts, braced for impact.

"We want you!" he bellowed at one little tow-headed kid headed his way, "To go sit with your mom!" He chunked a handful of Starbursts at the kid and wobbled away.

He moved too fast, though. His arms splayed out and pinwheeled as he fought for balance. Candy sprayed out from his bag. He bucked back and forth, the lines for his stilts now visible against his loose red and white striped trousers. Finally, he pitched over. The half-second before he crashed into Mount Squashmore, I glimpsed the sense of grim inevitability on his face.

I stopped my cart and jumped out to check on him. I was closest, but I was joined immediately by Coach and Junebug, and Olivia came running up soon after, speaking frantically into her walkie-talkie. She hooked it on her belt and said, "Oh my gosh! Braden! Sweetie! Are you okay?"

Braden actually looked pretty okay. The four presidents had cushioned his fall. The whole paper and chicken wire shebang crumpled under him and he slid to the ground, appearing mostly embarrassed.

He was already trying to kick off the stilts, but Olivia insisted on him lying still. “Let me get Dr. Moore,” she said. “Just to check.”

“Really, I’m okay,” he said. “I scraped up my hand, that’s it.” He ripped the white beard off over his head.

“Lie still,” Olivia said again. “He’ll be right here.” She lifted her walkie-talkie back off her belt and brought it to her mouth to say something, then froze.

She stared at Junebug’s wagon. Then she screamed. Long and loud.

The crumpled Mount Squashmore had slid aside to reveal the dead body of Bart Greer, crammed into the cart and curled around three arrows stabbed into his torso.

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Maria Grazia Swan

Pies, Lies, and a Last Goodbye

The only obstacle between Monica Baker and handsome millionaire Tristan Dumont is—his wife. When both his wife and his beloved horse vanish, chaos follows. Blame and suspicion reach into the lives of everyone involved with Monica and Tristan, all the way to the retired seniors running the Dumont Ranch.

CHAPTER ONE

“No barking, no barking. Arghhh... Dior, why can't you be more like Scooby-Doo and just talk? Don't mean to insult you but stop barking.”

I got a wet tongue on my cheek and a louder bark. Darn.

We were driving right past the gate of the Dumont residence, and I didn't want Tristan Dumont to see me. Like I needed another embarrassing moment.

“Come on big boy, get down. Stop barking.” The Great Dane couldn't care less about myself inflicted predicament. All he wanted to do was leap out of the car, run up that driveway and play with Tache, Tristan's Appaloosa.

I stepped on the gas of my hot pink Fiat 500. In a blink or two of an eye, we were out of sight and on our way to the 40th Street trailhead, south of Shea Blvd. The very same spot where I first met the man I've been pining for ever since, Tristan Dumont. I remember like it was yesterday. How could I forget the way he came down the trail that ended in the parking lot and rode into my heart.

I noticed the horse first, lively and all black, or so it seemed from a distance. I knew all the trail regulars, and neither the horse nor the rider looked familiar. As for the man on the horse? Everything about him screamed city slicker. I had to shield my eyes to get a better look.

Yep, white shirt, probably professionally laundered and starched, and a red bandanna. I held the enthusiastic Dior on a short leash and waited for horse and rider to pass us. The better to check out his footwear, always the choice giveaway. You can tell a lot about a man by his boots. Whether he's a serious horseman or not.

My bet was on some shiny, exotic, brand new cowboy boots he bought for show. As they came closer I saw that the horse wasn't exactly black after all. At the end of the saddle, the back of the horse was covered in white spots. That was the first time I'd seen a spotted appaloosa up close and personal. And I was hooked.

No, not on the horse, on the rider, crocodile boots and all. I should add, it happened before I knew who he was: Tristan Dumont, a wealthy, married client of the real estate company where I work. And even after I knew his details, it didn't change my attraction. Is it because something illicit feels more exciting? Or could it be our competitive human nature fuels our desire to “win” someone if he or she is taken?

I don't know because I've since spent every minute of every day since I met him fighting the urge to be with him. Not that he ever asked me. Yet.

So late in the morning, the parking lot at the end of 40th Street was nearly empty in spite of the spring-like weather. Lucky break for us. I could leave my car under a tree and take a little jog

with Dior. Once the weather reached 100 degrees, they closed the trails to dogs, for very good reasons. And I totally agreed with the rules. Too many fools dragged their pooches up those hotter than hell rocky paths and risked canine heat exhaustion or worse.

Our short jog took a lot longer than planned as the Great Dane had to stop and sniff every bush, every tree. We called the sniffing and leg lifting Dior's doggie messaging. And this time of the year, after an unusual abundance of winter rain, the desert was blooming, adding more shrubbery for him to explore.

It was close to 11 AM by the time I returned Dior to his owner, Brenda Baker, also known as my former aunt-in-law. We caught her standing in the center of her to-die-for-pantry, deep in culinary thoughts.

"What's up?" I asked, after refilling Dior's water bowl.

She looked at me, but I'm not sure she even registered my presence. She gets that way when she's busy assembling menus in her mind. Besides being a Registered Dietician Nutritionist consultant, Brenda owns and run B&B Catering. B&B could stand for Brenda Baker or Baker & Baker. Depends who you ask. By the way, I'm the other Baker. Yes, Monica Baker. The last name is the only reminder I retained from my former spouse, Tommy Baker, Brenda's nephew.

His dad was a firefighter who passed away right after our divorce, but not before gifting me the hot pink Fiat 500 I adore. Convertible mind you. The only way I was able to fit Dior, the blue Great Dane, in the back of the car was with the top down. More often than not, Brenda would pay me to assist with her catering jobs. Everything helped while trying to build my real estate business. My realtor license being so new, I used my boss's signs when doing an open house. But Sunny Novak didn't mind. She was the best real estate broker a newbie could ask for.

"I signed up a new client for a party," Brenda said. "He wants a Kentucky Derby theme. For twenty guests."

"Oh. How many horses? Are we wearing hats?"

Brenda turned to look at me, disapprovingly blinking her brown eyes, then shook her head, "Nooo. It's not that kind of party."

"How many kinds of Kentucky Derby's are there?"

"The dinner is coming up, the Derby is in a month, more or less. You can check your faithful Google Oracle. These are big-time investors, also known as gamblers."

"Oh, I'm not sure what you're saying."

Long sigh. "We'll serve expensive foods and open a full bar. From what I'm told, they get together to pool their betting money or something to that effect. I'm not sure if they allow women. I didn't ask." She laughed and said, "It doesn't matter," in that short, raspy laugh, a reminder of long years of smoking. "Our foods are equal opportunity goodness."

"Wow. Big times, heh? Are you working on the menu?"

"No, they provided me with a list of 'must serve' items, so I'll come up with fillers, and then I'll need to work up a quote. You're welcome to join us, but it's a weekday, no weekend."

"You've got me really curious. Is it at someone's house? Or what?"

“They’ve rented a private residence in Paradise Valley, I understand it’s a rather old mansion with horse stables.” Brenda acted like it was just another boring dinner, but my imagination was running wild with images from the Great Gatsby, the one with Robert Redford and Mia Farrow.

Ah, the romance, the clothes, Redford in a white tennis outfit, Redford in a white bow tie and formal attire, those high cheekbones and amber eyes and—wait—amber eyes? Somehow Tristan Dumont’s features had replaced those of Redford in my limited edition of a lover to be. I sighed and got back to business.

“Got to hit the road and go to the office. See you tonight.” I picked up my car keys and headed to her back door. Changed my mind, “Dinner here?” I called out.

“Yeah, like you need to ask. Bob will probably join us.” Officer Robert Clarke, also known as Bob, a good friend of Aunt Brenda. As she liked to point out... just friends.

Most of the spaces of the Desert Homes Realty parking lot were taken. I had hoped some of my colleagues would be out to lunch. Wrong. I could name the owners according to their vehicle. The beat-up Kia belonged to Kassandra, our receptionist and front desk factotum, the polite way of saying jack of all trades. Scott, our tall, hunky twenty-something with a weirder sense of humor than Kassandra’s, also our sign installer and the owner of the shiny truck with a few of our posts peeking out from the tailgate. The broker and owner of the business was Sunny Novak, my mentor and Brenda’s good friend.

The Cadillac belonged to her. Apparently, her spoiled brat daughter Celine was visiting. Celine didn’t work in our office, which was a blessing. We all knew about her big drama scenes when she didn’t get what she wanted from her mother. We all envied her royal highness’s carriage, the powder blue Sebring convertible. Celine, blonde and beautiful to boot, also wore designer clothes I usually only saw on sleek magazine covers. And she had a major crush on Tristan Dumont. Rumors were they may have had a brief affair. An affair, with the married man of my dreams.

Still, Mrs. Dumont seemed to find Celine entertaining because she visited the Dumonts often. Something that disturbed me deeply, in so many ways. All unjustified. And that wasn’t the more bizarre thing about the Dumont’s marriage. No. The big riddle was why a young, rich and handsome Tristan would marry Angelique? She was old, penniless and in poor health. Okay, scratch penniless. That was before she married him unless there was a prenup, but somehow, I doubt it.

They shared the same home. That I knew for sure since I was the one who helped with the closing documents and more. The Dumonts were personal friends of my boss Sunny, at least the families knew each other. I’m not sure my boss had ever met Angelique before they moved into the house, and I got involved because I was Sunny’s personal assistant. Which is why I spent so much time with Mr. Dumont, and he never, ever was anything but polite and nice and... something about his eyes... and the nickname he gave me. Fiat. Yes, I know that’s a car. My Italian car. Unique. And every time his lips said Fiat in the most casual way, well, I got all mushy and loved him even more.

Mercy me.

I parked my car in a spot at the far end of the parking lot and crossed in the blinding sun until I reached the threshold of the office lobby, the door open, dreaming of more impossible dreams.

“You coming in or are you practicing for a part-time job as an usher at the Harkins Theater? I hear they are hiring.” Premium Cassandra.

“You got that from your Tarots?” I chided her, walked in. Yes, Cassandra dabbled in Tarot cards, and when we were in a funk, that’s where we looked for answers. Usually, while sharing a bottle of wine and some tasty happy hours priced sliders. Truth be told, Cassandra was more than I was on every level: older, taller, louder, risk taker, promiscuous, snarkier, and above all, beloved by the whole office. Okay, except for Celine, but as I pointed out, Celine didn’t work here, she only came when there was something she wanted/needed.

I closed the front door behind me, and instead of heading to my small cubicle in the general area known as the Bull Pen, I walked into the kitchen. Cassandra followed me. Scott was already there, sitting on one of the four chairs.

“Scott, are you eating cold pizza?” I asked.

He turned his whole body to look at me, “Why would you assume it’s cold?” he asked.

I sensed Cassandra in back of me. This small place seemed to shrink more every day.

“Instinct,” I said.

“Good instinct. You’re right.” He said. “Wanna a slice?”

The idea of cold pizza made me feel queasy, I stretched my neck and noticed pineapple. On a pizza? To an Italian, that’s a sacrilege.

“Thanks, I’m good,” I said, averting my eyes from the pizza. I went straight to the shelf where we kept our mugs. Mine sat next to Cassandra’s that said Another Day in Paradise. Before my fingers could grab the mug, an unmissable voice called out, “Hello, anyone here?”

Tristan Dumont was at the front desk. We never heard the bell chime, how did he get in? While I ran scenarios in my head to regain my calm and act professional before meeting his eyes, Cassandra was already there. I heard him ask about someone dropping off a package for him? Hard to tell with a rush of clippety-clap fast heels approaching from the back of the office. We all recognized the signs even before Celine chirped out his name.

“Tristan, oh, Tristan what a nice surprise.”

Now we knew why she hung around her mother’s office. Sunny probably let it slip that Tristan would be coming into the office, and Celine probably saw him park his Land Rover from the window in Sunny’s office.

B***h. I quietly retreated into the kitchen where the pizza looked as gross as before, but no one cared about it. I made an effort not to listen to what was happening in the lobby. Except it was hard to ignore Celine noisy high heels.

Oh, hell. I picked up my own mug, filled it with ice cubes and water, grabbed my purse and folders. I ignored Scott’s smirk and walked out of the kitchen and toward my cubicle. Celine stood in front of Tristan, two gorgeous creatures, and I pretended I didn’t see them and kept on

moving. Plus, I knew Kassandra was making mental notes of their conversation, and she was always open to bribes. To be honest, a quick side-glance while passing by allowed me a peek of a rather annoyed Mr. Dumont. And that put a smile on my face.

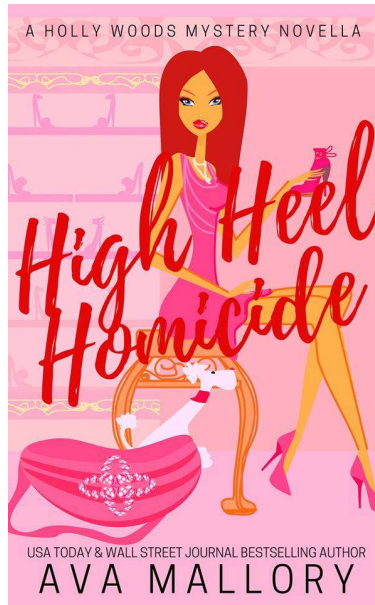
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Ava Mallory

High Heel Homicide

Budding Screenwriter Holly Woods is too nice for her own good. If she's not raising funds for her favorite charities, she's rescuing stray puppies, or helping to feed the needy. But after years working three jobs and volunteering for local charities, an anonymous philanthropist wants to do something for her... but there's a catch.

She must help clear the donor's name in a murder-for-hire scheme or suffer unknown consequences. Is an all-expense paid trip to the land where stars are made worth the risk or has the farmer's daughter finally found the one person she can't help?

CHAPTER ONE

"I don't know what a Simon or Garfunkel is, but if I hear anyone else mention their names again, I will kill them."

"That's what you said?" Ayla cocked her head to the side. "You couldn't come up with anything more poetic to say? Have I taught you nothing in the twenty years we've known each other? I swear, if Gering wasn't so small, I'd get a new best friend."

She could say that until her hair fell out, we both knew it wasn't true. She adored me. She always had, even when she claimed she didn't, which was often ever since she got engaged to Whit. That's Sheriff Whitley Franklin Knox III, the myth, the legend, the only other person on the planet who could see past her over-the-top antics.

"Go ahead. Try to get a new best friend. Let's see, I believe our population is somewhere around no one has time for your bad attitude." I laughed at my brilliance.

She spun on her heels and swung her long, chestnut-colored hair over her shoulder. "Don't make me the bad guy. You're the one who quit your job, not me."

I lifted a brow at her. "The only reason you haven't quit your job is that they give you the family discount. Don't act self-righteous with me, girlfriend."

She stopped before she got into her car. "True, but at least I have a job."

"No, you don't. You get a paycheck. I've never seen you do any work." Her family owned an equipment rental business in a neighboring town. Ayla's only function was to smile at customers as she escorted them to her father's office. She didn't handle transactions. She didn't answer phones. She didn't help her mother with the bookkeeping. Nope. Her accounting degree was just something her parents hung on a wall in their home office. She'd never once used it.

She started her car, checked her reflection in the rearview mirror, leaned out, and said, "Are you getting in or do you plan to walk the five and a half miles home today?"

I had no choice. It was a hundred degrees outside. Sugar beet season was in full swing. The pungent odor from the local meat packing factory added an aroma no one who grew up in this area ever forgot, much less got off them.

I glanced back at Goodwin's Gems, the jewelry store I'd worked at since I was in high school, and sighed. "I can't leave." Ayla groaned. "I want to, but I can't. I'm the only one here. If I leave someone could walk in and wipe out all the inventory. I can't live with that on my conscience."

She closed the driver's side door. "Fine. Stay, but do you have a plan for getting home?"

I shrugged. "Nope."

"How did you get here?"

The only car I owned was parked two blocks away, just past the tortilla factory, after the baseball field, but right before you ran into the bait and tackle shop. I mean my car was hoisted about ten feet above the ground as the town's only mechanic took his third nap of the day.

"You know how," I said.

Her mouth fell open. "Not again." I shrugged again. "How many times are you going to let him use you?"

The person she referred to was my on again, off again boyfriend, Colby Goodwin. He and I had been off again for three months, but when you live in a town this small, it's next to impossible to avoid running into them every time you turned around.

"It was a ride. He drove down my block and—"

She rolled her eyes, nearly knocking one of her long, fake eyelashes off her face. "You live in the country. No one is in your neighborhood unless they took a wrong turn off Highway 71, so do you want to try that again, liar, liar, knockoff Prada pants on fire?"

"Fine. I called him to see if he could do me a favor. He said yes. Big deal," I said as I glanced back at the store. "Someday, I really will quit."

She fixed her lash. "Yeah, yeah. You hate the elevator music on their playlist. You don't enjoy cleaning diamonds that don't belong to you. You were made for bigger, better things, but you're too afraid to go after your dreams. I've heard it all before. Everyone in town has heard it. No one believes you. If you wanted to be an actress like you say you do, you'd pack your bags and ditch this place. We all know why you haven't done it yet."

I covered my ears and stuck my tongue out at her. "Don't say it."

"Because Colby is this close to inheriting the family business. You've fooled yourself into believing he plans to share his jewelry empire with you. News flash, he won't. They never do."

She might as well have punched me in the gut. The truth hurt. Even if I'd heard it a hundred times. Colby would never ask me to marry him.

A car pulled up in front of the building.

"Who is that? California plates? It's a quarter till five. The store closes soon. You better get in there and sell everything they have in stock while you can. Who knows? Behind those tinted windows might be the casting agent of your dreams. This could be your big break," she joked.

I didn't recognize the car. That wasn't unusual. We had a large convention center and several hotels in the area. Plenty of business visitors rolled into town for meetings, but few if any ever stopped by the jewelry store while they were here.

A tall man with shoulders as broad as a bronco rider and eyes as blue as a Colorado sky stepped out of the car and nodded at me. "Hello, miss. How are you this warm evening?"

I checked behind me to make sure there wasn't anyone else there. When I turned back in his direction, he was standing in front of me, assessing me like a piece of fine china. "Is this store open?"

I glanced at the store, unsure of how to respond.

"Yes?" he urged. "I heard it's the best place in town to buy quality gemstones."

Something in my mind clicked. He looked like he had money to spend. I hadn't had a good sale for a long time. If I played this right, I just might get my car fixed for good.

"It is and I'm the store manager. Come on inside. I'll show you all the goods," I said without thinking how it'd be interpreted by him and Ayla, who choked with laughter at my words.

I shot a glare at her. "Bye, Ayla. Get home safely."

She hesitated as if she wanted to say something and shook her head. "Bye. Call me if you need me." She winked at the man. "I suppose I'll see you again soon."

He grinned. "I should hope so." He held the door open for me. "Working all alone? Is that safe?"

"Around here? Sure." I stopped when I noticed his grin had turned to a scowl.

"What do you say we lock the door behind us? I prefer private conversations." He reached for the deadbolt and locked it behind him.

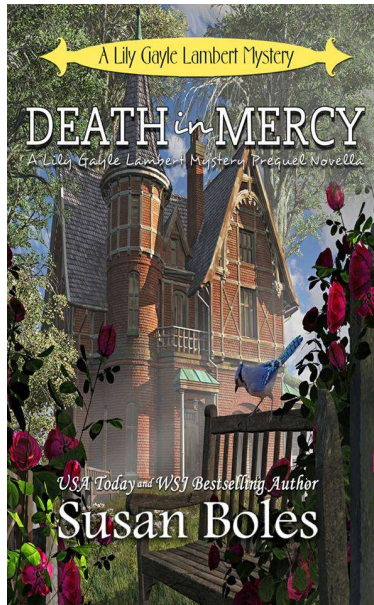
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Susan Boles

Death in Mercy

Ever wonder how Lily Gayle got started in the sleuthing business? Check out this prequel to the Lily Gayle Lambert series to find out!

CHAPTER ONE

I eased my bicycle to a stop outside Miss Edna's big Victorian house on the town square. I blew on my chilled hands wishing I'd had the good sense to wear a pair of gloves. True to form, Mother Nature was being coy about the weather in Mississippi. Mid-March meant nothing to her. Yesterday it'd been seventy degrees. Today it was fifty and the wind generated from riding my bicycle had turned my knuckles red and stiffened my hands.

Now I had to deal with Miss Edna, the town busy body. She'd deny it while she had breath in her body, but the rest of us knew it was to truth.

I'd only been back in town a few months but some things never change. Except my life. I'd come back home, almost kicking and screaming, at the insistence of my best friend, Dixie. She'd come to Nashville and dragged me out of the isolation I'd lived in after my husband died in a traffic accident.

Now I was back in the town where I'd been born working on rebuilding my life. Some days I wasn't sure that was possible. Others gave me hope that I could do it. I shook off the negative thoughts.

Today I was here to meet with Miss Edna about the Luck of the Irish party next week. Both of us were on the decorating committee. Who'd let her on the committee was still a mystery. No one owned up to it. I figured she'd intimidated someone into it who was too scared – or embarrassed -- to admit it.

I knew Miss Edna would be no help at all in the actual decorating as she's eighty years old and uses a walker, but she did like to express her opinion about everyone else's ideas for the party. I needed to go over the final details with her before Dixie and I went up to Memphis to buy anything we didn't already have in storage from parties in years past.

I hadn't been able to bring myself to drive since my husband's accident, and, as the wind gusted again, chilling me even more, I cursed my inability. My counselor had told me it was my mind's way of dealing with the accident and that I would drive again when I was ready. But, it sure was a big inconvenience in cold weather if I didn't have a ride in a nice warm car with a friend.

As I was contemplating the mysteries of the human mind, Miss Edna's front door opened and a man stepped out. Closely followed by Miss Edna.

Well. Well. Well.

A man coming out of Miss Edna's house wasn't totally unheard of – as long as it was the husband of someone she knew. But this occasion was unprecedented. I didn't recognize the man.

And I know everyone in Mercy, Mississippi by sight – and most of the ones in the surrounding county, too. Not much changes over the years in small towns like this one.

This man was dressed like Cary Grant in one of the old black and white movies I love so much. Dark suit, white shirt and even a fedora. But this guy's hair was white as snow rather than black like Cary's.

The stranger had all of my instincts pinging. Whether it was in warning or not remained to be seen. Miss Edna's a spinster in the old-fashioned sense of the word. She never married.

Before I could get my thoughts together, the man bent low over Miss Edna's hand and kissed it. My eyes dang near popped out of my head. Before I could wrap my brain around what I'd just witnessed, he'd come down the steps, tipped his hat to me and strode off down the sidewalk.

I cut my eyes hard right to watch him without turning my head. He got into an older model white Cadillac parked in front of the newspaper office a block away and drove off.

Realizing my mouth was hanging open in a most unladylike way, I clamped it closed and looked back to the porch. Miss Edna had disappeared inside the house while I'd been busy watching her departing visitor. Knowing her, she'd locked the door behind her. Even though she couldn't've missed me standing on the curb with my bicycle.

A gust of wind with a chilly edge energized me to close my mouth and get up those steps. At least I could get out of the wind there. I might have a bit of a wait on the front porch depending on Miss Edna's current mood. If she didn't want to talk to me, she'd just sit in there and let me stew.

She ought to know it wouldn't deter me one little bit. Like I said, nothing much changes, especially people, in a small town. I might have been gone for thirty years, but inside I was the same person who'd left all those years ago to attend Ole Miss.

A mystery man exiting the home of the town spinster was far too interesting not to pry into. To tell the truth I've gotten a reputation for being nosy myself – even back when I was a teenager here. But, in my own defense, I'm a genealogist now and it's part of my job to go digging around in people's business. Between my online genealogy business and my online shop for handmade period costumes, I manage to make a pretty good living for myself back here in Mercy.

I climbed the steps and knocked firmly.

I shivered as a gust of wind whipped around the corner of the house and across the big front porch. So much for the house blocking the wind. I scrunched closer to the front door and mashed the doorbell – and kept mashing. Darn that stubborn old woman!

I ought to just leave. I didn't want her input on the decorations anyway. But the mystery man kept me standing on the porch, finger firmly on the doorbell. I wanted to know about him more than I was annoyed by Miss Edna.

At last, the door opened and Miss Edna stood framed in it, glaring at me. I pushed past her, rudely, and got into the warmth.

"I'm sorry it took so long to get to the door, Lily Gayle." She said, not looking the least bit sorry as she closed out the winter air.

I ignored the remark and reveled silently in the warm air in the entryway of the old home and the crackling fire I could see in the parlor adjacent to the entryway. "I've come to talk to you about the final decisions for the Luck of the Irish party next week."

"Hmph." Miss Edna sniffed as we rounded the door and I bumped into her, nearly knocked her backwards. "Watch where you're going."

I stepped back and let her maneuver her walker around and shuffle back to her chair by the fire. I took the seat across from her.

"Do you want some tea, Lily Gayle?" Miss Edna asked me, sitting in her wingback chair by the fire where she had a tray with an antique silver tea pot and a cup and saucer. "You'll have to run back to the kitchen and get yourself a cup." She gave me a look. "I wasn't expecting company."

I stood, preparing to head back to the kitchen at the back of the bit house. "Can I bring you anything?" I inquired, politely?

"Just some peace and quiet. This house has been like Grand Central Station this morning." Miss Edna grumbled.

"Why, Miss Edna." I said. "I didn't know you'd been to New York City! How did this town survive with you gone up north like that?"

"You know darn well I've never actually been to New York. I was making a comparison based on hearsay." Miss Edna made a shooing motion with her hands. "Go on with you. You knew what I meant."

I bit back a grin, but didn't fool the older woman

After getting a cup and saucer from the kitchen, I poured myself a cup of tea and added three teaspoons of sugar. Miss Edna gave me a sour look as she watched.

Ignoring that, I opened my tote bag and pulled out the folders with our designs for the party. I wanted to ask about the stranger but I knew it was a bad move to lead with that subject. Better to distract her with party preparations first.

I handed Miss Edna one of folders. I'd chosen black with leprechauns dressed in bright green for the folders on a whim. From the look on Miss Edna's face, she didn't appreciate the attempt. I cleared my throat.

"So." I opened my folder to the first page. "We agree that we're going to have the band called Deputy Dawg to play."

"What a ridiculous name." Miss Edna interrupted.

I glanced at her, and when she left it at that, went on down the list. "Committee members are bringing various finger foods and we've bought a St. Patrick's Day themed cake to be served."

"I fear to ask what that even looks like. I just hope it's in good taste."

I sighed and showed her a picture of the cake. "It's a leprechaun hat."

Miss Edna didn't comment. I glanced up from my folder to see she wasn't even paying a bit of attention to the picture. My blood started to simmer a bit. I had a lot to get done if this event was going to be a good one and here I was, wasting my time.

"Are you even listening to me?" I inquired, trying to keep sarcasm out of my voice. "You insisted on going over these plans before Dixie and I go to Memphis to buy supplies and then to the Depot to start settin' up, but you're not even paying attention."

The old woman didn't bat an eyelash. I swear she could make a nun cuss. She just had to be up in everybody's business to the degree that, even though I knew deep down she didn't give a rat's ass about the St. Patrick's Day dance, she still had to have her opinion consulted.

Come to think of it -- why was I even deferring to her on this? But I knew why. My mama had raised me with a whole unwritten book of rules about elders and such. And, as a general rule, I tried to follow them faithfully.

I vented my frustration by stirring my tea with unnecessary vigor making the thin china ring with the silver spoon.

"Careful with that china, Lily Gayle." Miss Edna snapped. "That belonged to my granny."

I put the spoon down and tried to get a grip on my frustration. "I don't know where your mind is wanderin', Miss Edna. But we need to focus here."

Miss Edna sipped her own tea, giving me a scathing look over the rim of the cup. "I don't know why it's so important that we have this silly dance."

I reached for the folder resting, unopened, in her lap. "And I don't know why you insisted on being part of the committee."

The old woman placed her cup carefully on the side table. "Because I'm an institution in this town and my participation means something."

You need to be in an institution, I thought. But I kept my mouth shut. No sense pouring oil on a fire.

"Fine. Let's get this done then." I opened my folder again. "Do you approve the food list and the cake?" I questioned with more patience than I thought I could possibly keep maintaining.

Miss Edna's eyes roamed down the list in the folder that she finally opened. I don't know why she even bothered; it was the same list, with the same food, that had for every event in town for years. All the ladies had their specialties they made and brought and woe to anyone who deviated from tradition.

I should know. I tried to jazz it up the tired old menu a bit with some recipes I liked from New Orleans. You'd've thought I was trying to start a war with the way the local ladies had come against me on all of them.

"I see Missy Elliott is bringing green cupcakes." Miss Edna commented. "No doubt in the shape of leprechaun hats, or something equally ridiculous, for the event."

I held back an eye roll with great determination. It would only cause more delay if she caught me at it. “Yes. You know she always makes the cupcakes.”

“I suppose she’ll be with that man she’s been seeing lately.”

Missy Elliott, our local real estate guru, had begun dating a man from out in the county a couple of months earlier. He seemed to be okay. We hadn’t seen much of him since he preferred to take Missy into Memphis on their dates. And who could blame him? Not much to do in a one-horse town like Mercy, Mississippi if you were trying to impress a date.

“I reckon she will.” I answered. “I’m hoping to get a better read on him. After all, Missy is our friend and we need to watch out for her. She’s been a widow a long time and since Ian is in the Navy now he can’t keep a close eye on her.”

I closed my folder, sipped the last of my now cold tea and prepared to leave. I was meeting Dixie at her beauty shop, the It’ll Grow Back, and we were heading to the Memphis to buy a few new supplies at the party store then and then to the old train depot in town to get started on decorations.

“I don’t suppose you have a date of your own, do you?” Miss Edna asked with a sly smile.

I hadn’t dated since I’d moved back to town six months ago. As Miss Edna knew very well.

I felt a slow burn creeping up my cheeks and silently cursed the cantankerous old woman. Why did she have to push my buttons like this every time we got together? Why did I continue to associate with her? I sighed silently. Because even though she made me crazy with her ways, she was a good soul. I tried to keep that in mind now.

“You sure do seem awfully interested in matters of the heart today, Miss Edna.” I answered. “Is it possible you have a beau yourself? I saw that attractive man kissing your hand as he left earlier.”

Miss Edna’s nostrils pinched together so tight I was amazed she could still breathe. Her back, already straight, went even more rigid. It sure was a sight to behold. I reckon I’d never actually seen Miss Edna in a state of righteous indignation.

“I don’t like what you’re implying, young lady.” She spat at me in a low voice. “Your poor mama must be turning in her grave at such disrespect in her daughter.”

Wow. I’d really hit an unexpected nerve. Her reaction made me even more curious about the gentleman caller. Unfortunately, Miss Edna wasn’t going to give up any information in her current state of mind. I had things to do. I’d swing back by after Dixie and I finished working on the decorations for the party. Maybe she’d be in a more mellow state of mind.

Or not. I had things to do right now.

I stood up, stuffing the black and green folder into my tote. “I’ll be going now, Miss Edna. It’s clear to me your mind isn’t on the subject at hand.”

I strode out of the room, but before I could open the front door and be gone, my conscience, in the form of my mama’s voice, made me go back.

“Miss Edna, I apologize for offending you. I didn’t mean that. You know me well enough to know that I’m curious as the day is long and, if you’re honest, you’d have been amazed if I’d left here without bringing him up.”

With that, I turned and went out the front door. The stranger's car had been parked close to the newspaper. Maybe he'd gone in there first and Arlene would have some information about what he was doing in town.

I could spare a few minutes before I met Dixie to check in at the newspaper. Real casual like. Just to visit with Arlene for a minute. If she happened to know something about the stranger...well, that was just icing on the cake.

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